

PROJECT : BALLAD

*Michael Peterson
Kevin Czapiewski*

vol: **1**





NOW LOADING...

Table of Contents



Prologue

Thirty-four years ago,
a boy is lost.

pg. 2



Chapter One

Kendra has a wake-up call;
William is told a story;
a troll approaches;
a village suffers;
and an appointment is missed.

pg. 11



Intermission One

An apology is offered;
circles are closed.

pg. 93

Cast of Characters	pg. 102	“The Only Way to Travel”	pg. 104
“The Tesseract”	pg. 115	Authors Page	pg. 127

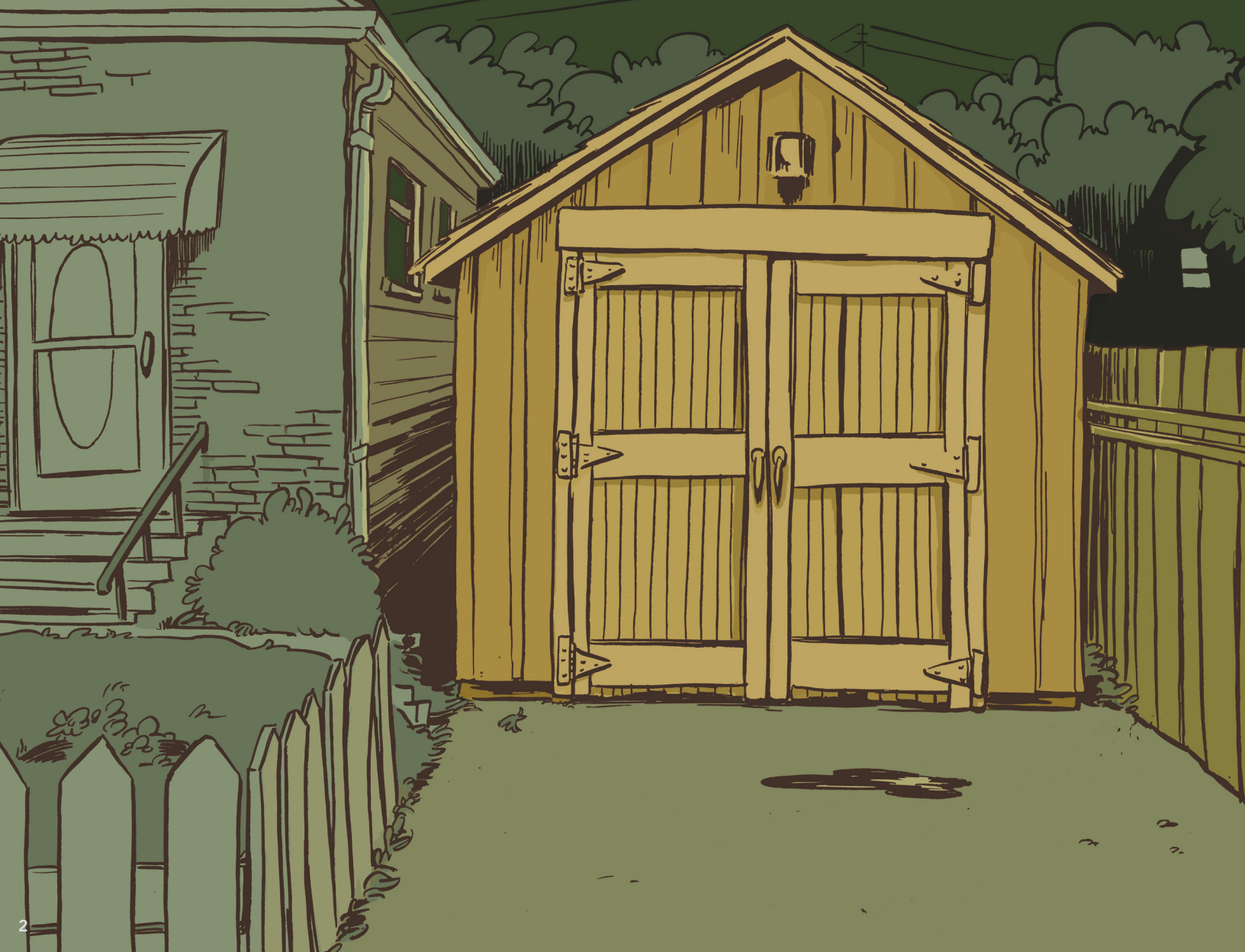
The “Project Ballad” concept and original design documents by D. Edward Sauve and Michael Peterson are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

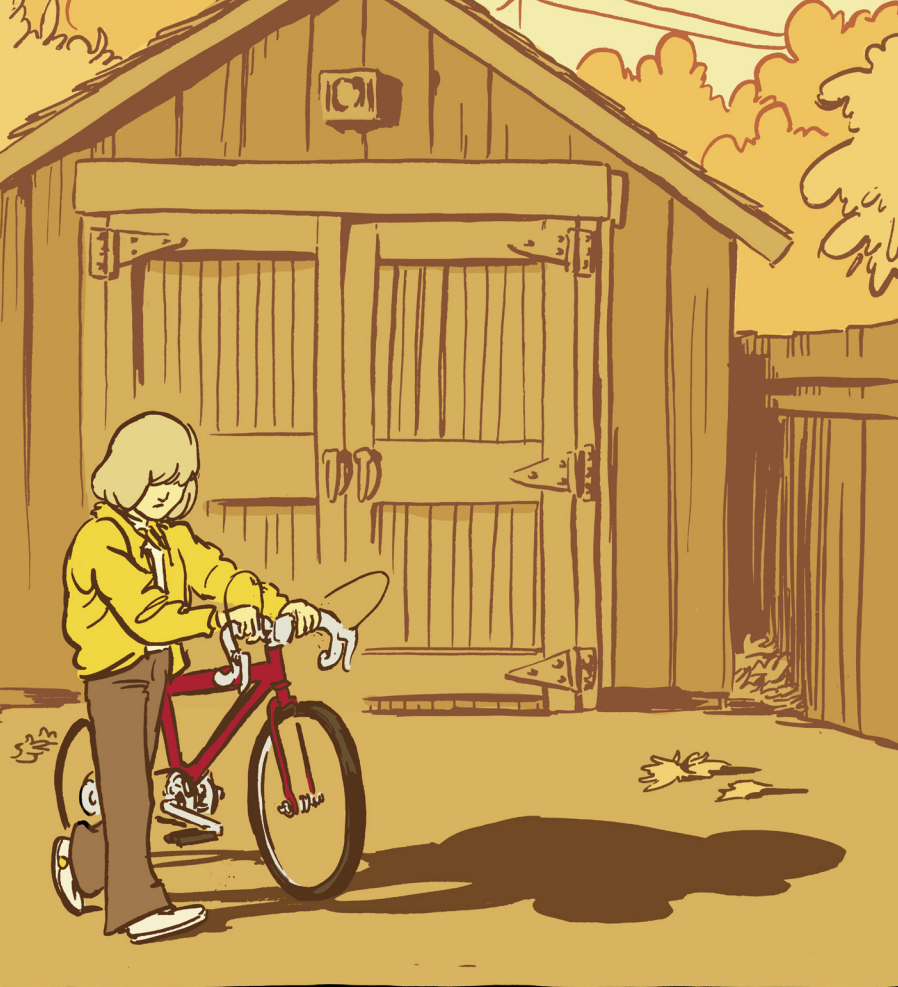
The comic, “Project: Ballad,” and all other related materials, including tangential writing on this site, is by Michael Peterson and Kevin Czapiewski and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

Parts of this text appeared originally in the novel *Masters of the Universe*, by J. Christian Leblanc, based on a story by J. Christian Leblanc and Michael Peterson, used with permission.

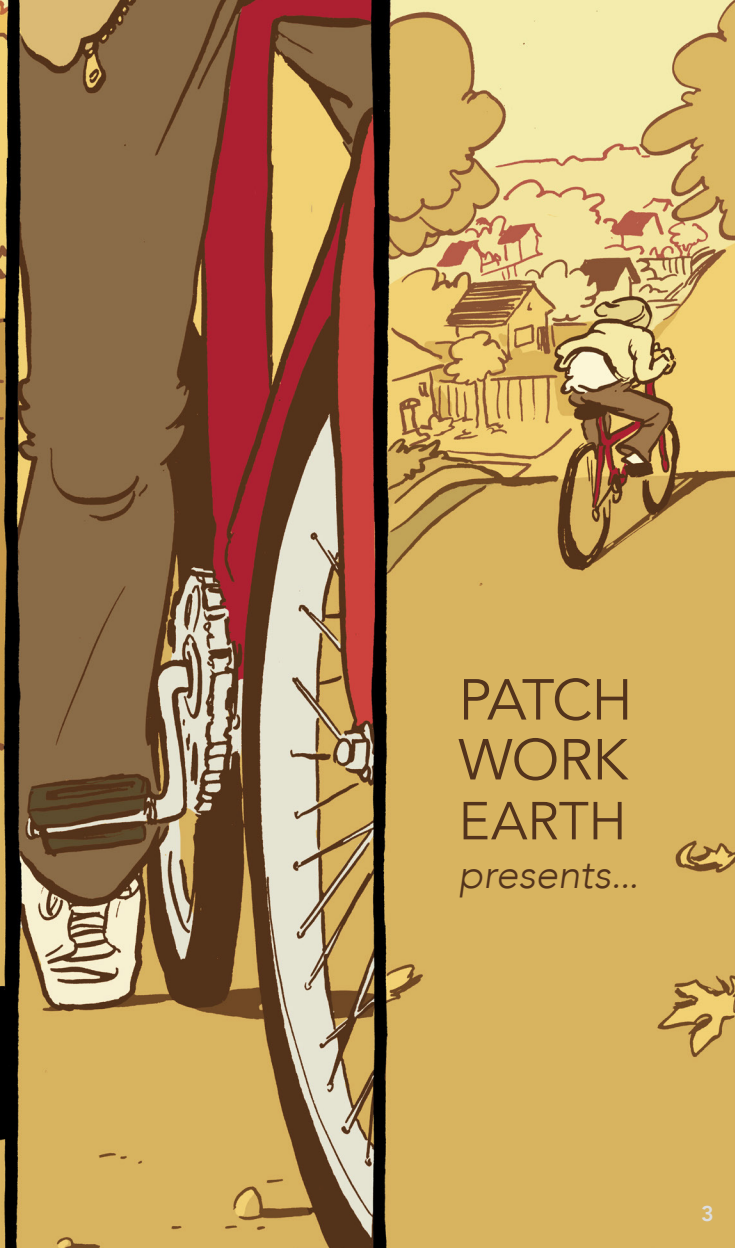


2010-2014 Patchwork Earth
projectballad.com





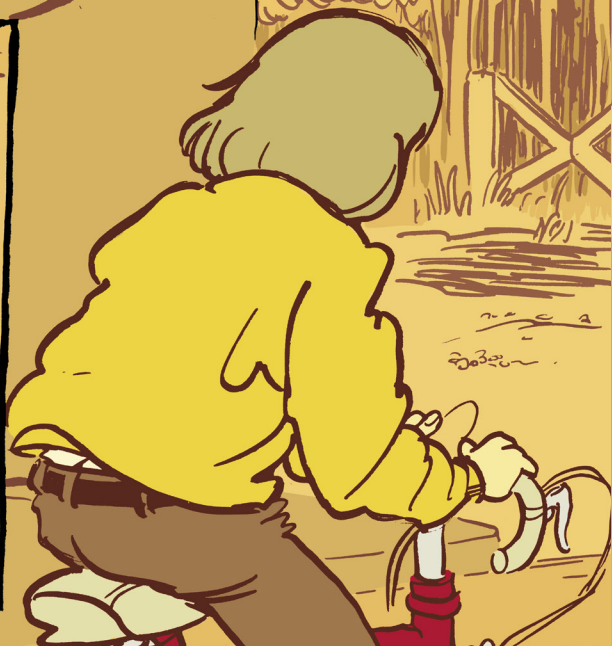
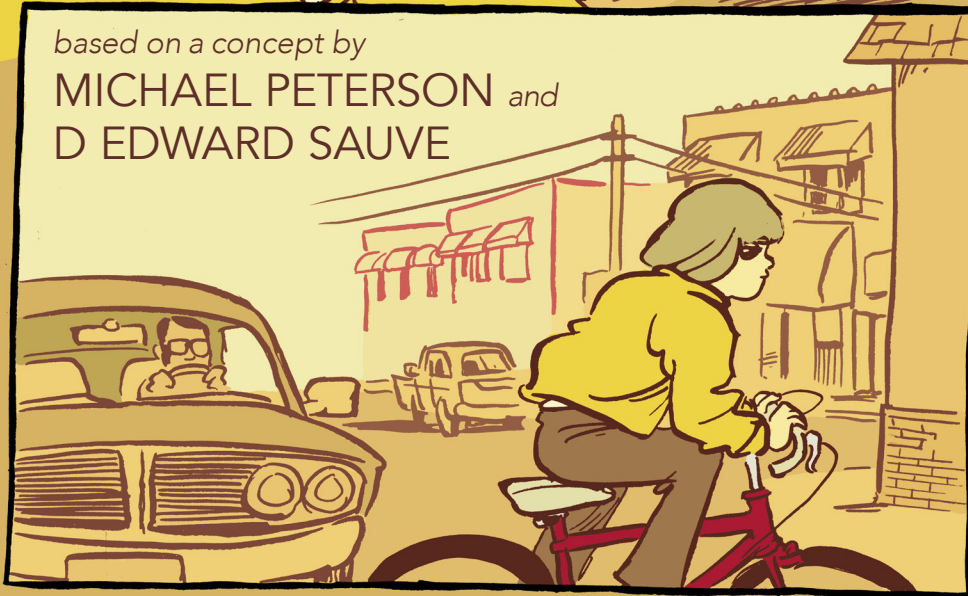
thirty-four years ago

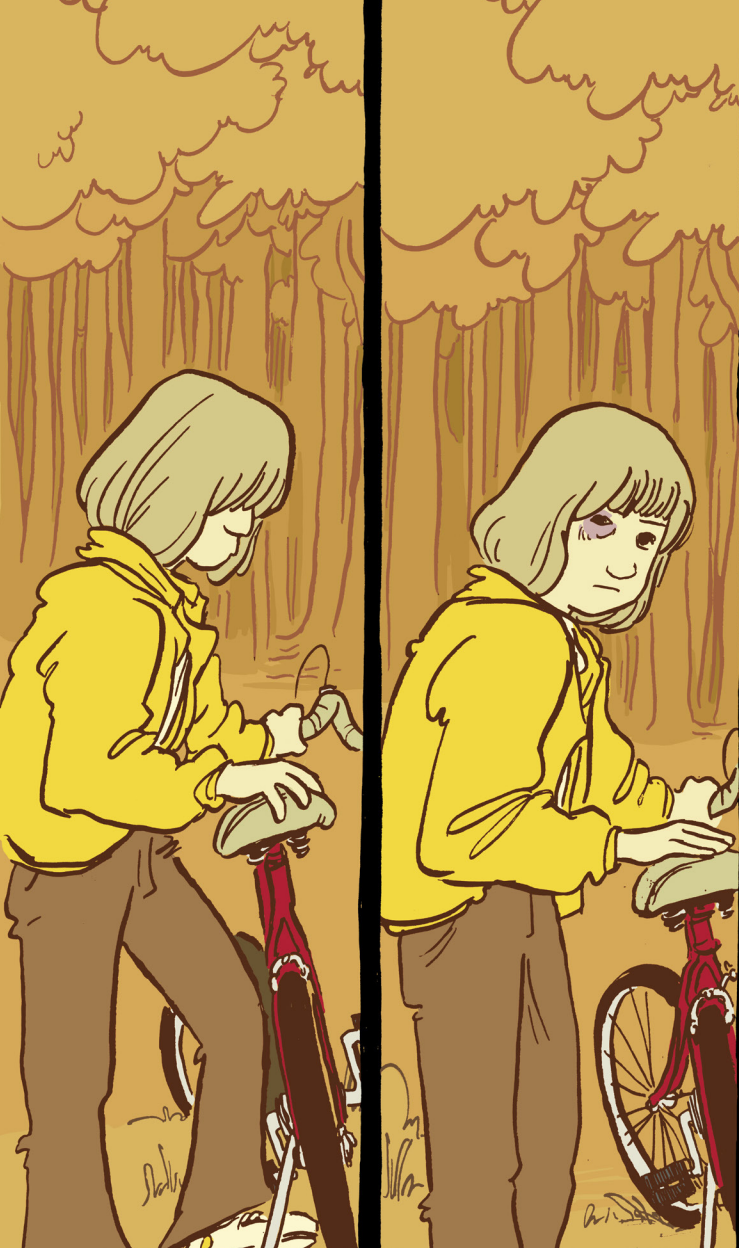


PATCH
WORK
EARTH
presents...

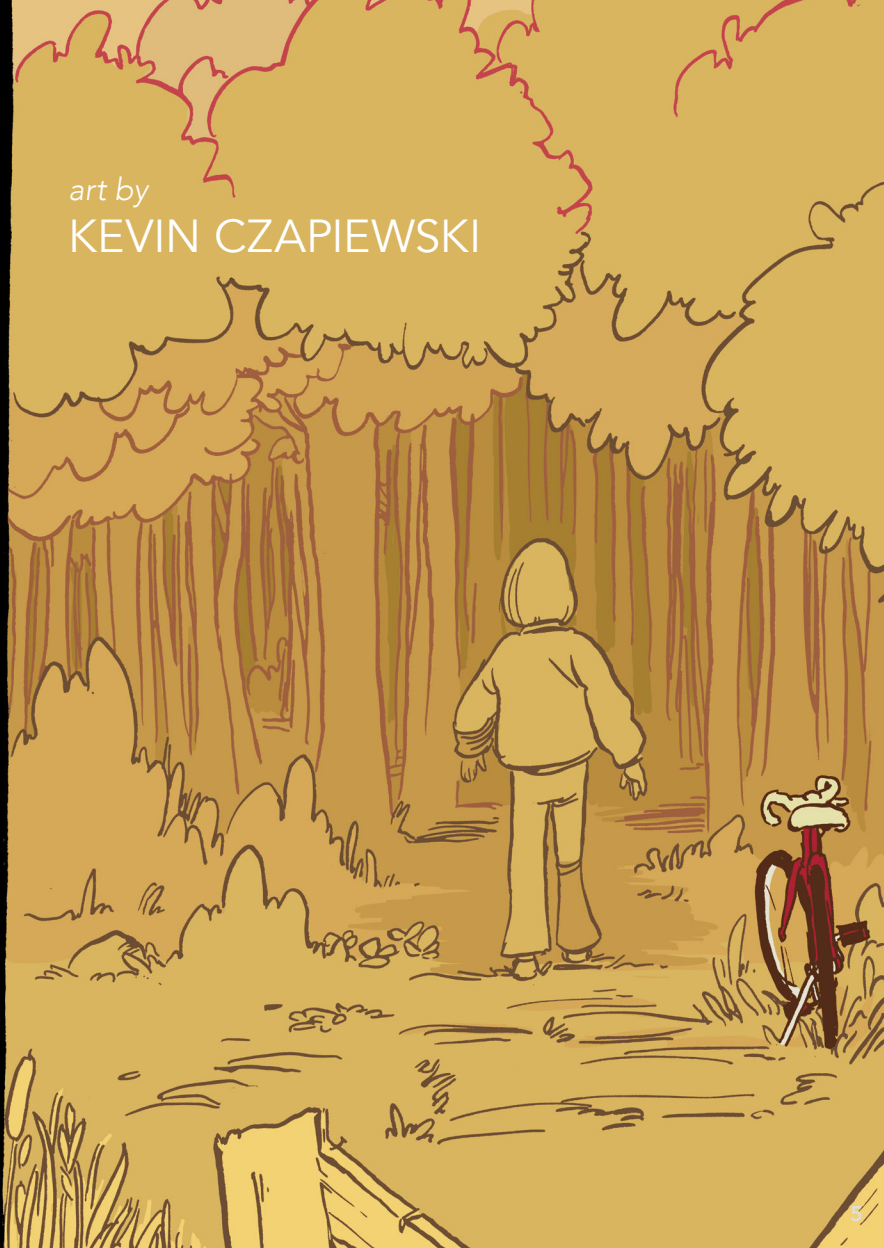


based on a concept by
MICHAEL PETERSON and
D EDWARD SAUVE





art by
KEVIN CZAPIEWSKI





story by
MICHAEL PETERSON





PROJECT BALLAD

“ One god there is, in no way like mortal creatures either in bodily form or in the thought of his mind. The whole of him sees, the whole of him thinks, the whole of him hears. He stays always motionless in the same place; it is not fitting that he should move about now this way, now that. But, effortlessly he wields all things by the thought of his mind.

- XENOPHANES OF COLOPHON

“ I wanted to keep on painting forever. But, suddenly, I couldn't. As the picture neared completion, the empty part of me started to manifest itself in my brushstrokes. I was meant to be painting her as she really is... but... this picture is... my own self... My empty self has begun to appear within there. That's why... I've got to stop now.

- XENOGears OF PLAYSTATION

channel
NEWS 3

Next up,
more live on
the scene--

--where a
comic book
convention has
become the site
of real-world
violence.

SALLY ALCORN
10:13pm ET

BIRD FLU STILL A MENACE IN ASIA AND BEYOND -- I.M.F. REPORTS CYBERATTACK LED TO 'VERY MAJOR BREACH' -- PROTESTERS IN JAPAN VOICE WORRIES ABOUT ENERGY CRISIS

channel
NEWS 3
LIVE

Yes, Sally,
things are tense
here in Fusco,
Indiana tonight.

GILLIAN CHEN
10:13pm ET

BIRD FLU STILL A MENACE IN ASIA AND BEYOND -- I.M.F. REPORTS CYBERATTACK LED TO 'VERY MAJOR BREACH' -- PROTESTERS IN JAPAN VOICE WORRIES ABOUT ENERGY CRISIS

SUNDAY - 10:14PM

channel
NEWS 3
LIVE

It's unclear
why the building
has yet to be
evacuated--

-- but you
can see the
police response
here behind me.

BREAKING: CHAOS AT CONVENTION
10:14pm ET

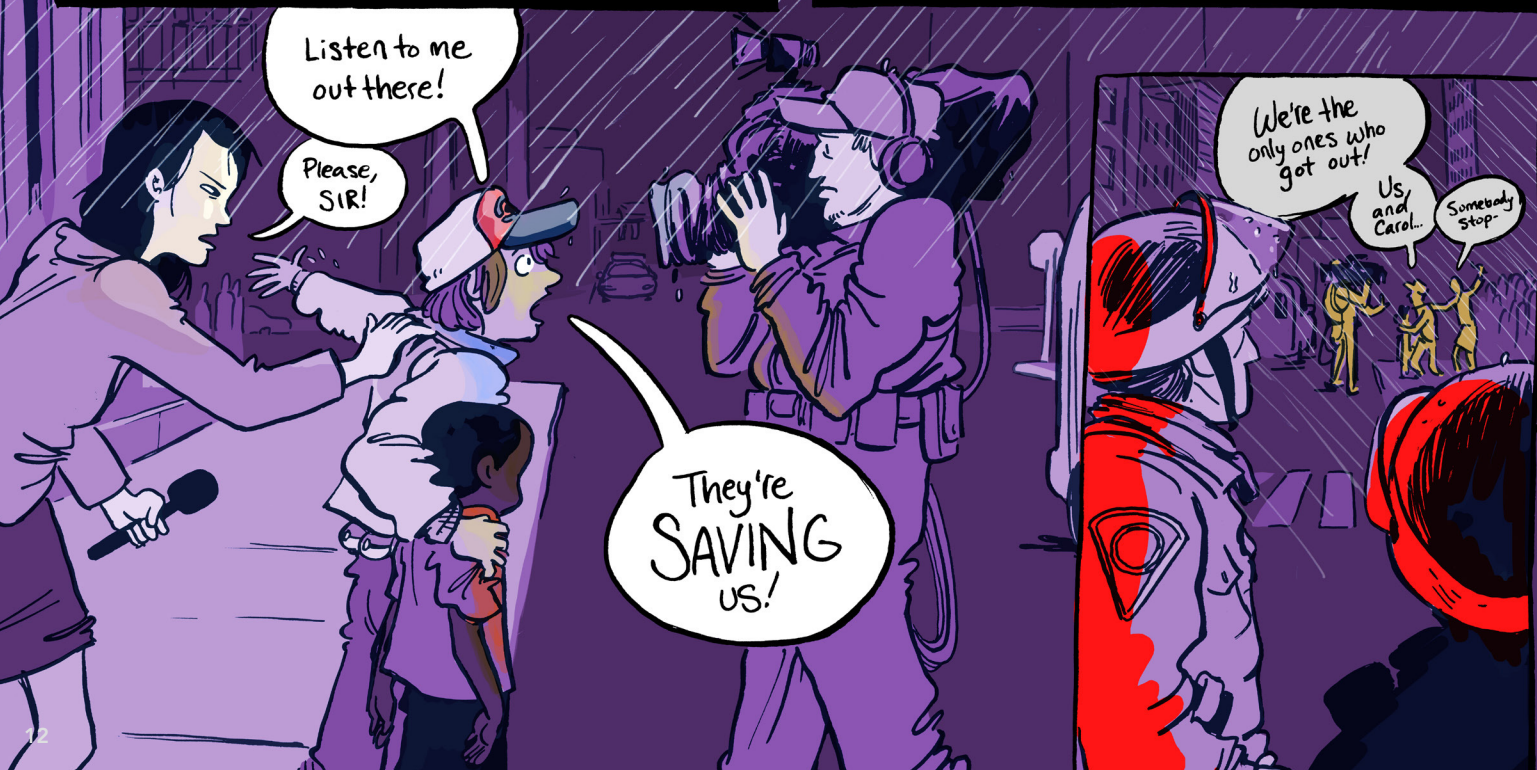
PROTESTERS IN JAPAN VOICE WORRIES ABOUT ENERGY CRISIS -- CHILEAN NAVY: ALL 122 PEOPLE ABOARD A CRUISE SHIP STRUCK WITH E. COLI

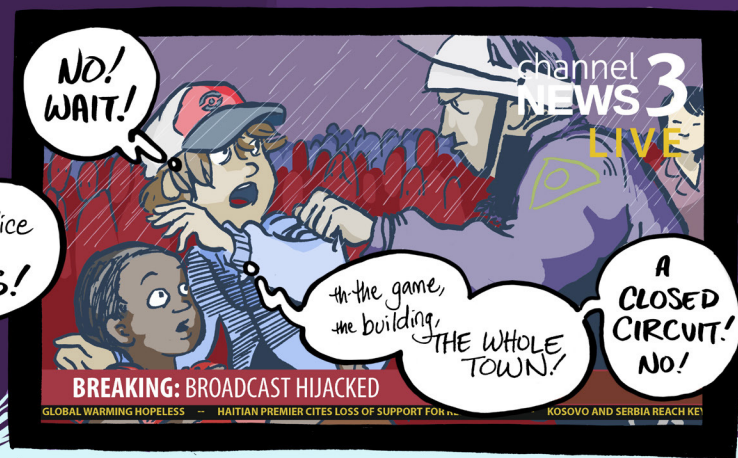
channel
NEWS 3
LIVE

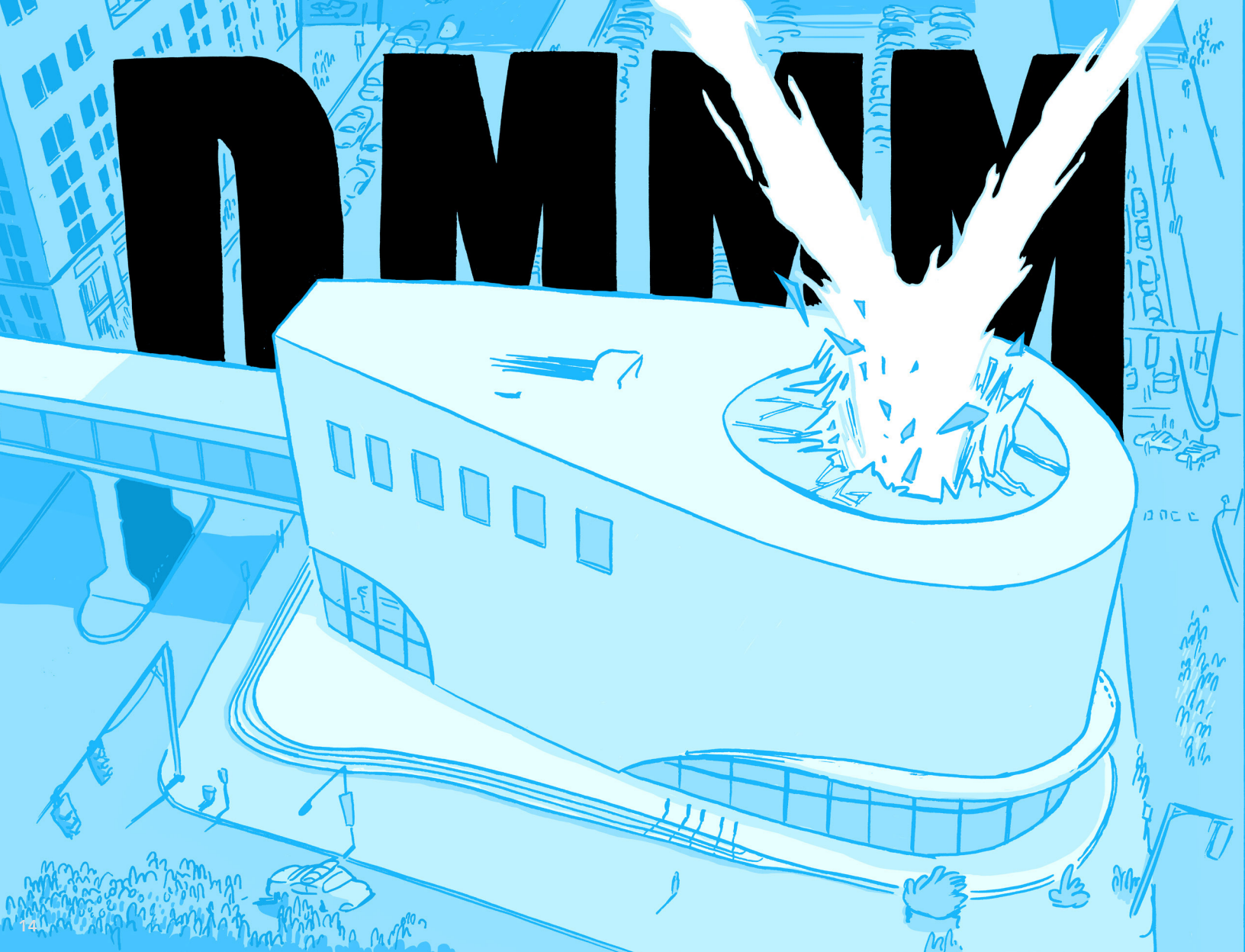
--unconfirmed
number have
barricaded
themselves in the
convention center.

BREAKING: HOSTAGE SITUATION

WITH E. COLI -- AIRPORT OPENS IN NAJAF -- SYRIA OFFERS A CHARTER AS ATTACKS GO ON -- IRAQI ARMY -- CHINESE ARMY

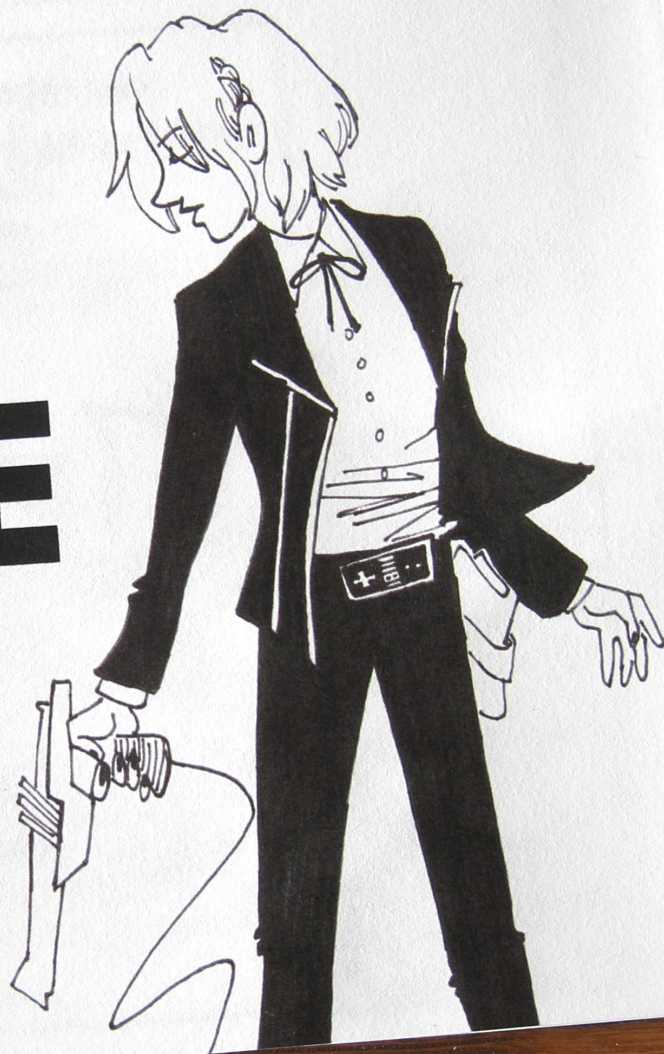






CHAPTER ONE:

A DAY AT THE FAIR

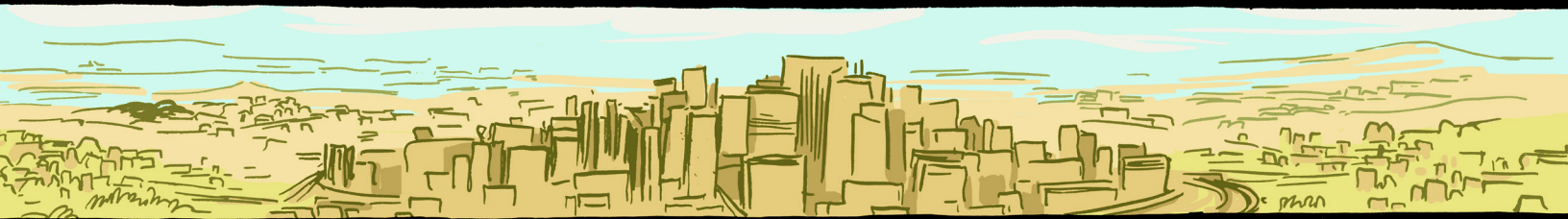


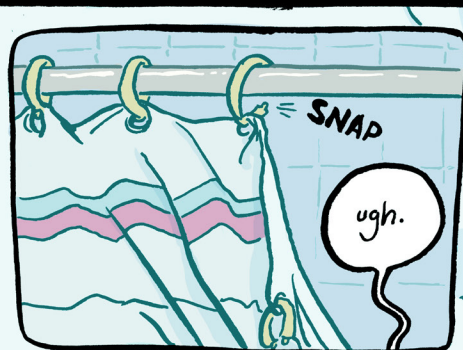
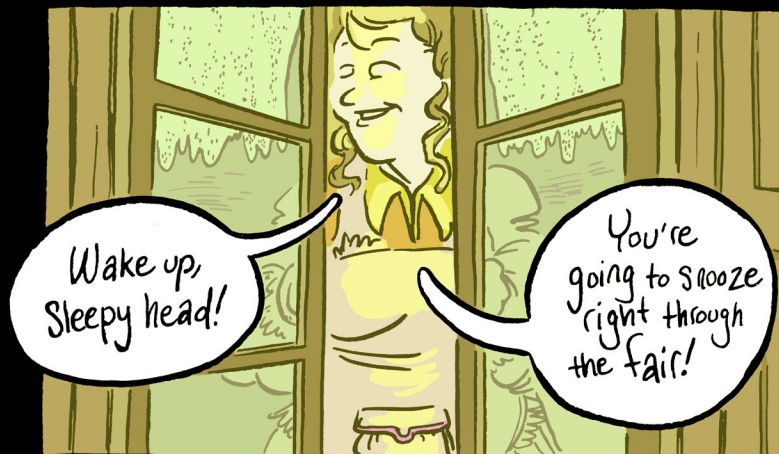


"And so, we expect the storm to hit some time late Saturday. Sally?"

"Thanks, Jimmy."

WEDNESDAY - 3:11_{PM} (preview night)

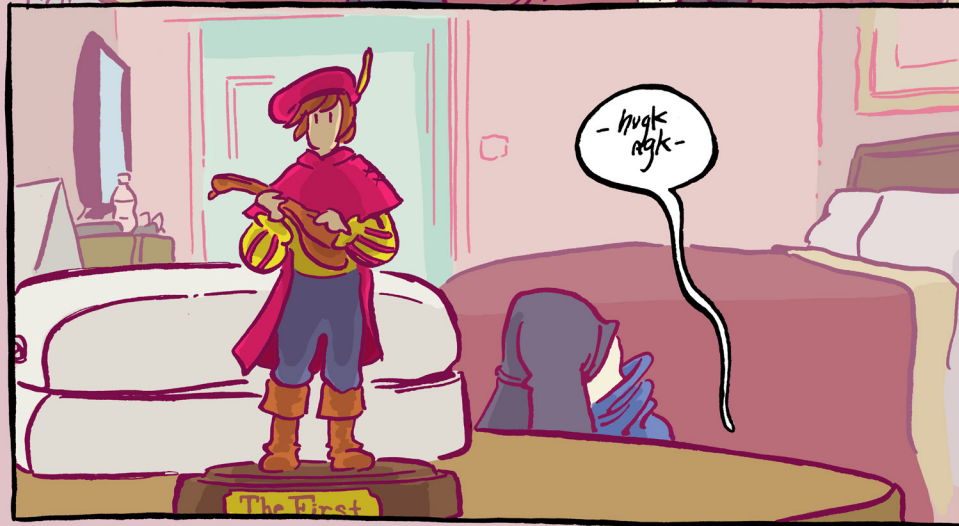






dammit. dammit.

& time is it?



I count myself lucky,
is that I didn't have many
problems with boys
growing up.

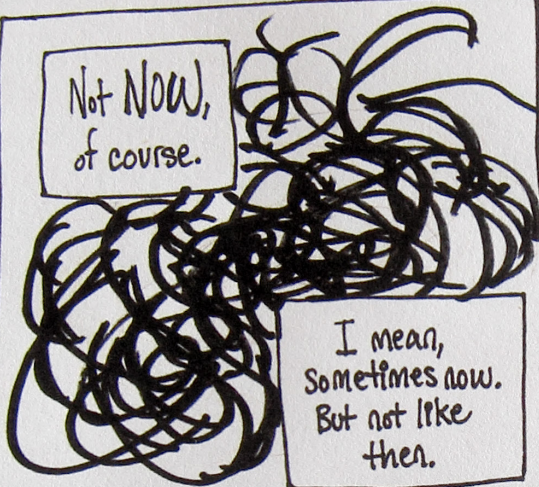
I mean, I've had
problems with GUYS.

But boys,
not so much.

Except when
it came to...

...Well.

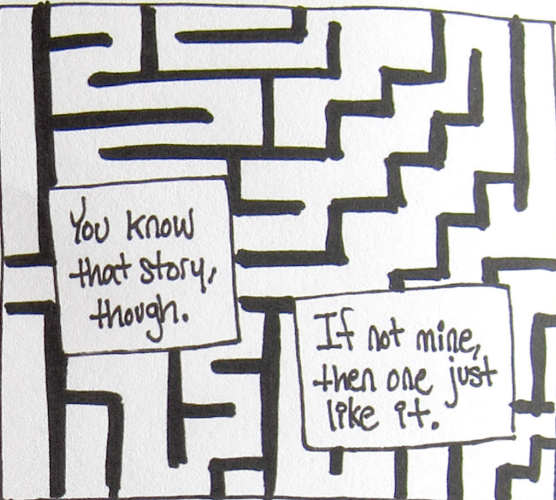
Not NOW,
of course.



I mean,
Sometimes now.
But not like
then.

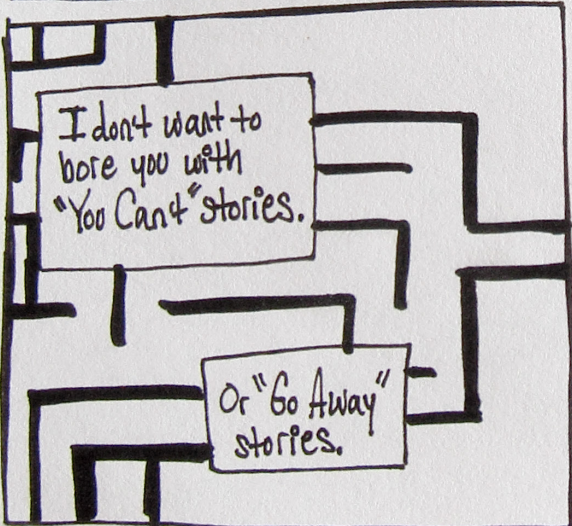
You know
that story,
though.

If not mine,
then one just
like it.



I don't want to
bore you with
"You Can't" stories.

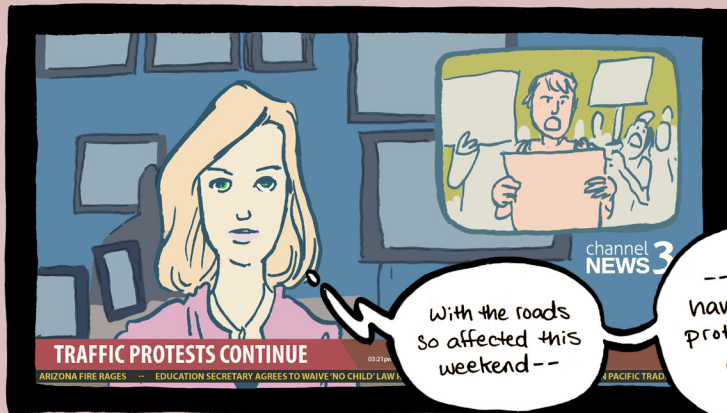
Or "Go Away"
stories.



Let me tell you a
"Why" story, though.

A "Why I'm Still
Here" story.





With the roads
so affected this
weekend --

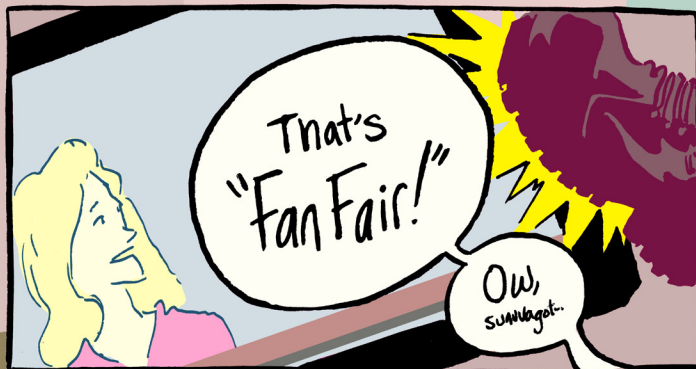
-- citizens
have resorted to
protesting outside
City Hall!



Good luck
to all the folks
attending the
Funfest this
weekend,
huh?

All that
traffic!

Haha!



why
AM
I here?





LAURA DOUGLAS

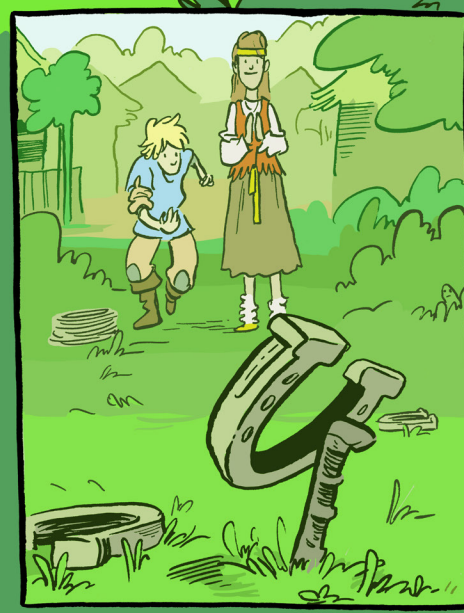
SN: MALDAVIRSDAUGHTER
POST COUNT: 434



KENDRA PRICE

SN: COMBATMAGEWOMAN
POST COUNT: 1396







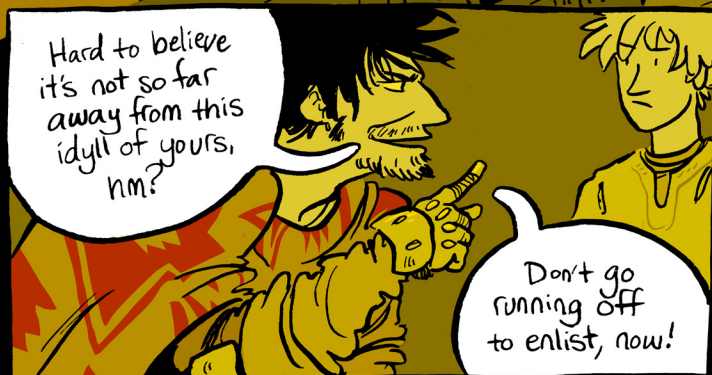
Come
here,
boy!

This man,
Stroud,
comes from
outside the
forest!



Now, now!
Don't scare
the boy!

Ah, but you
bring news
of the war!



Hard to believe
it's not so far
away from this
idyll of yours,
hm?

Don't go
running off
to enlist, now!



So, what brings
you to our village?

Passing on
through to
New Cliffport.

I've dire business
there, I'm afraid.
(very hush-hush)



You know, the boy here's going to take his first trip to the fair.

Thinks himself an "Adventurer in Training!"



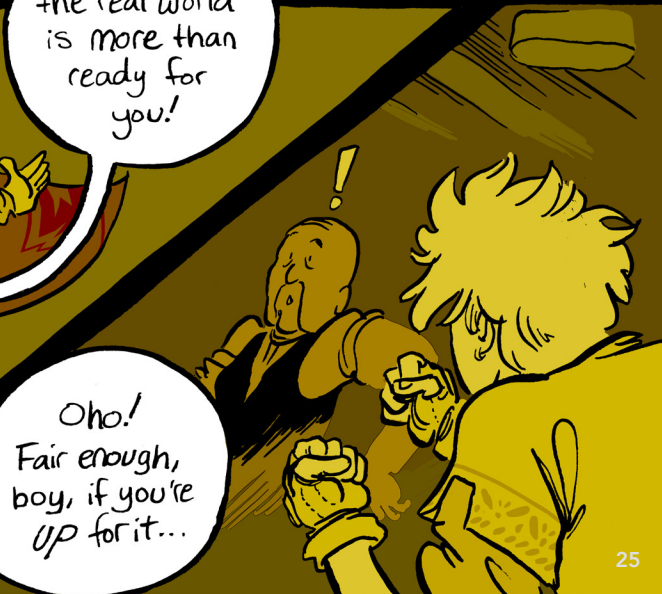
Oh, does he?



You think you're ready for a taste of the real world, child?



I'd say the real world is more than ready for you!



Oho! Fair enough, boy, if you're up for it...



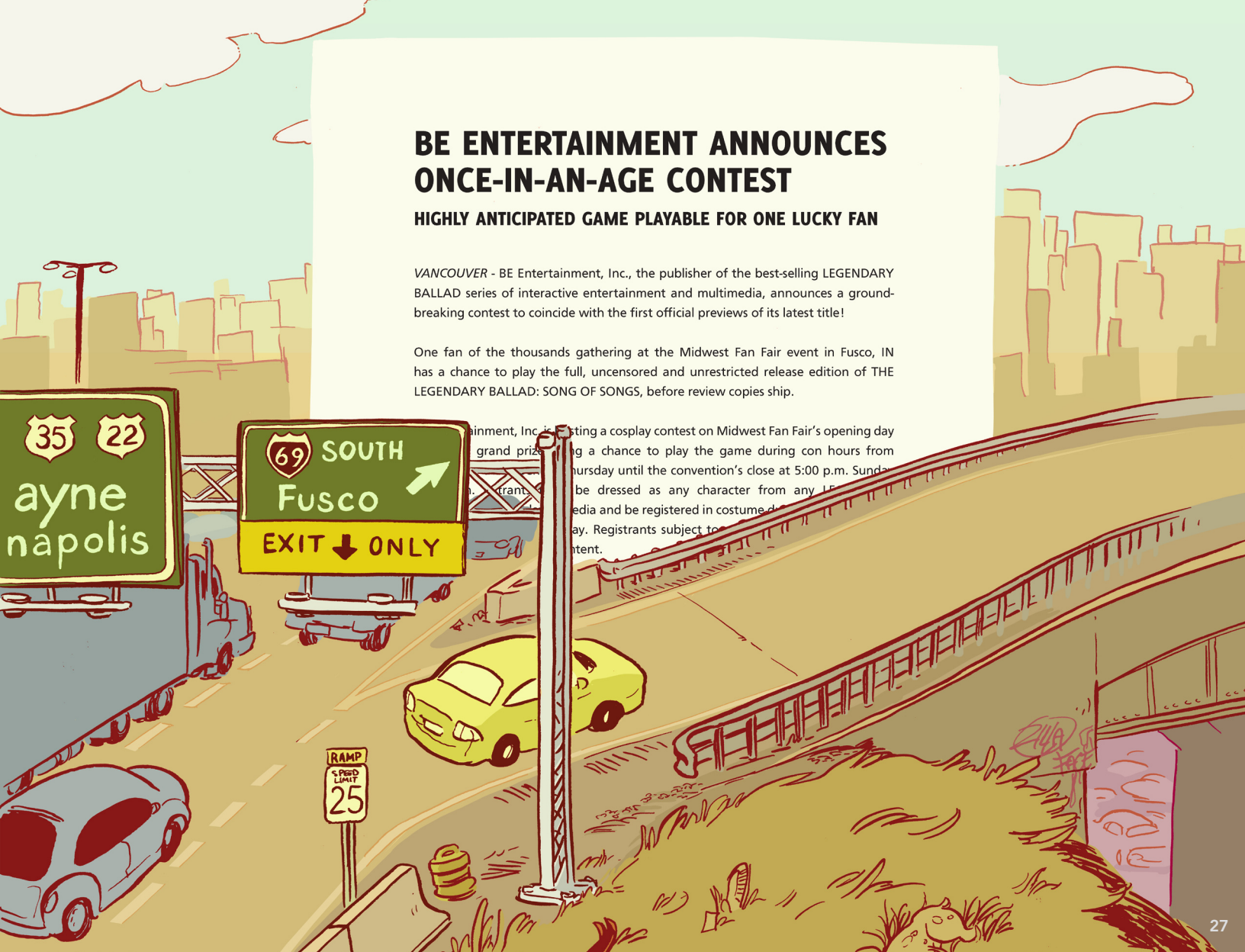
BE ENTERTAINMENT ANNOUNCES ONCE-IN-AN-AGE CONTEST

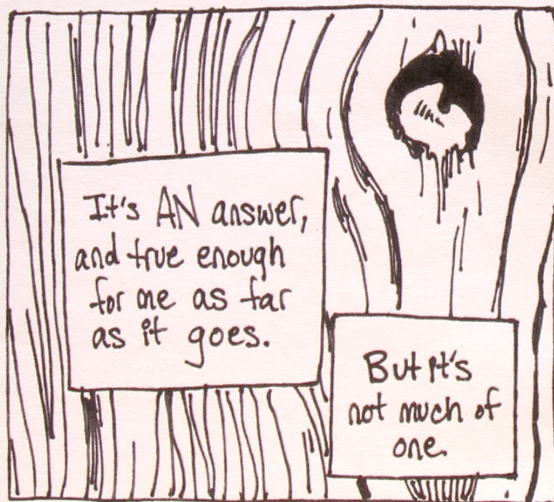
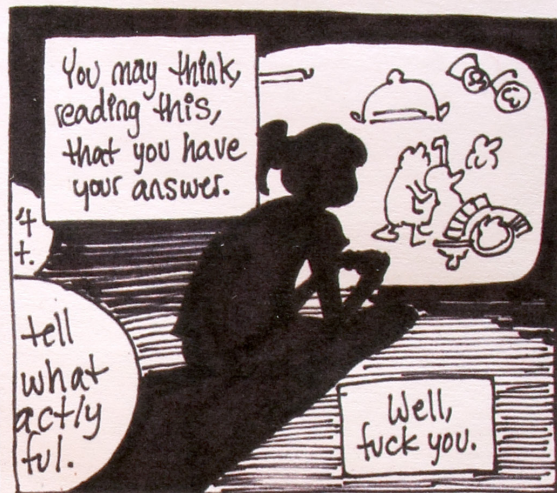
HIGHLY ANTICIPATED GAME PLAYABLE FOR ONE LUCKY FAN

VANCOUVER - BE Entertainment, Inc., the publisher of the best-selling LEGENDARY BALLAD series of interactive entertainment and multimedia, announces a ground-breaking contest to coincide with the first official previews of its latest title!

One fan of the thousands gathering at the Midwest Fan Fair event in Fusco, IN has a chance to play the full, uncensored and unrestricted release edition of THE LEGENDARY BALLAD: SONG OF SONGS, before review copies ship.

BE Entertainment, Inc. is hosting a cosplay contest on Midwest Fan Fair's opening day with a grand prize of a chance to play the game during con hours from Thursday until the convention's close at 5:00 p.m. Sunday. Contestants must be dressed as any character from any LEGENDARY BALLAD media and be registered in costume during the contest. Registrants subject to contest rules. Content.





parttimemistrss

@combatmagewoman you take care of my girl, K, or I will hurt you in the LEAST sexy way that I can think of.

39 seconds ago from web

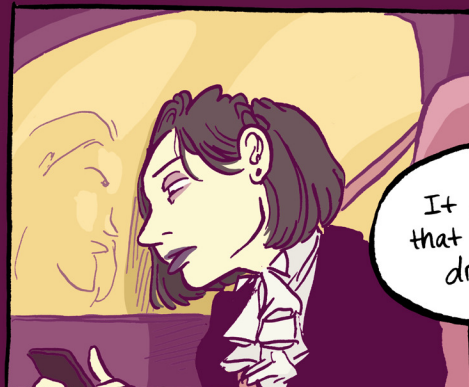
combatmagewoman

Up. Hung over. On the way to the con with @joanssbitch, hate everyone.

2 minutes ago from Obake Monsterphone

BE_Entertainment

Today's the day. #LegendaryBallad
#SongofSongs #MidwestFunFair



Tons of great costumes already.
#LegendsOfTheMidwest #SongofSongs
#Midwest

No...
it was
sweet,
you know?



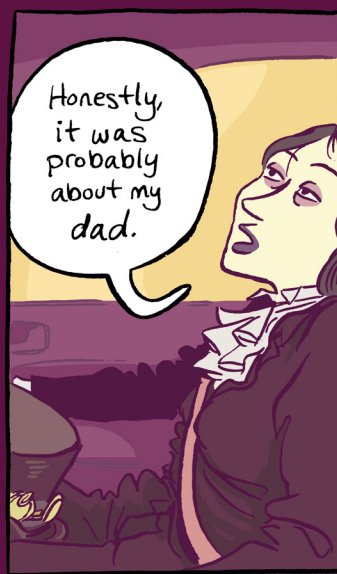
Nice.



I was
being
carried.

He had
on a...
Cape...

or cloak,
or
something.



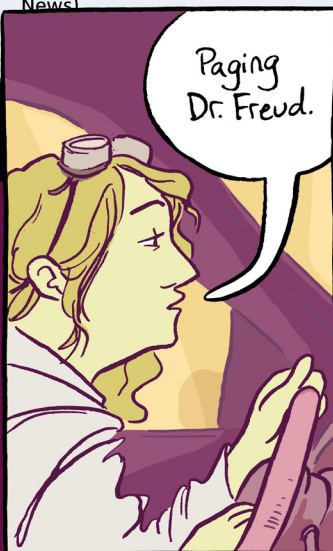
Honestly,
it was
probably
about my
dad.

Stag_OnTheHorn

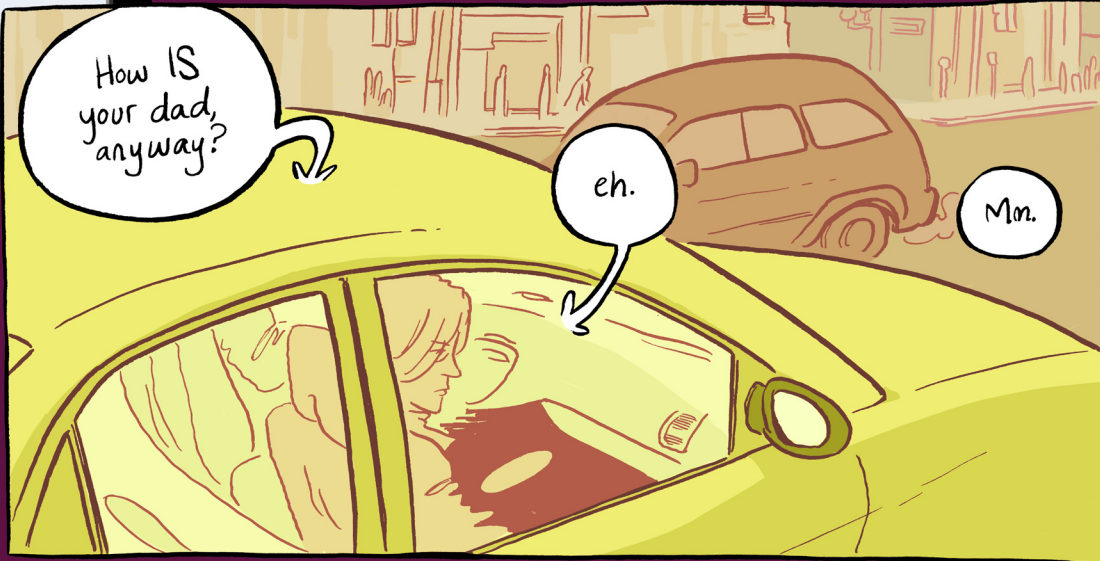
@combatmagewoman @joannsbitt
We're meeting in the Pre-Reg room
see you when you get here
5 minutes ago from Obake Monsterphone

WNBA

Ann Arbor's a growing hotbed for
women's hoops (via the Ann Arbor
News)



Paging
Dr. Freud.



How IS
your dad,
anyway?

eh.

Mm.



HA!



Well, boy.
Done for the day?

He's not enough!



Enjoy your childhood,
I pray you.

You'll see
precious
little of it
down a road
like mine.

CRASH





the
Accursed
...
!

The furies I've pinned
to e-e-v-e-r-y belt, their
gleaming hungry eyes-

-just sayin',
this new one needs
to speed up the
combat turns.

Ehh,
I dunno.

They know-
this love's- sinister
re-priiiiise

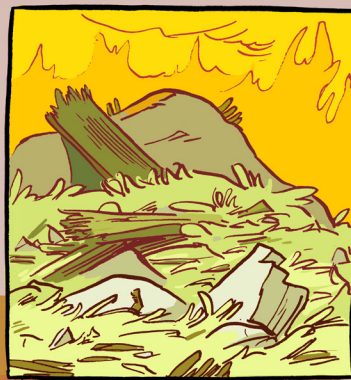
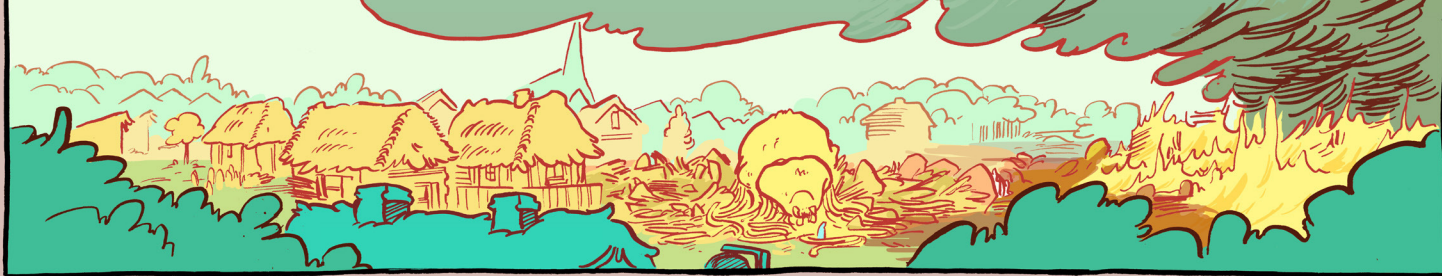
Is this
new
Hanae?

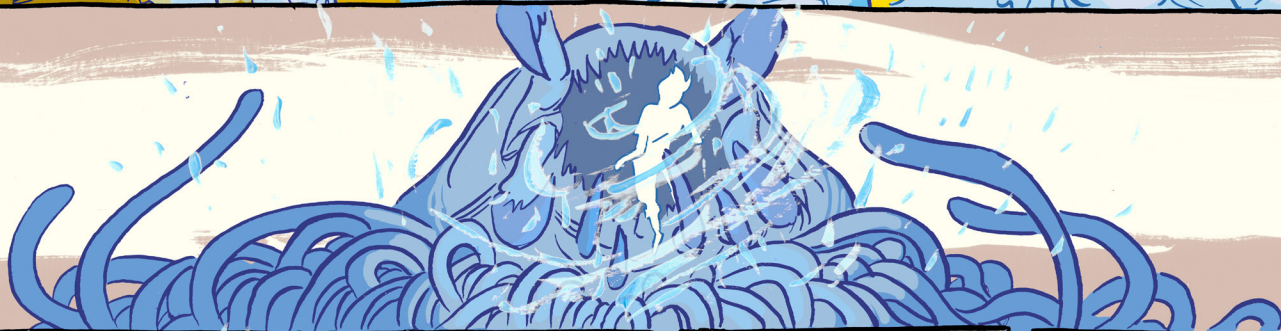
yopp.

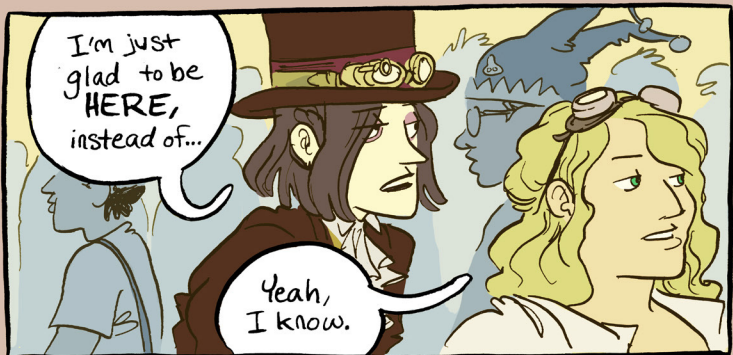
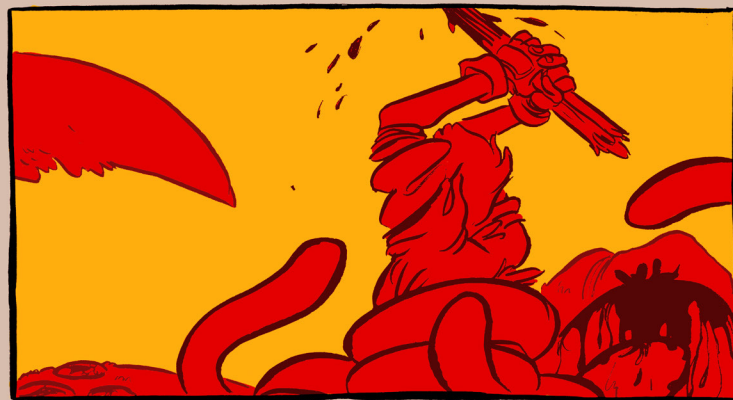
oooooOoh
ERIN-
YES ERIN said
Noel

under
water
tails gnash
Soo moe

You can't
go home
again...







Someone always
wants to know why
you spend time doing
a thing.

Especially when it's
a thing for "other people."



I think my
head's finally
clearing up.



We're
really
here!

You do
look a little
better

C'mon, let's
go meet the
others.

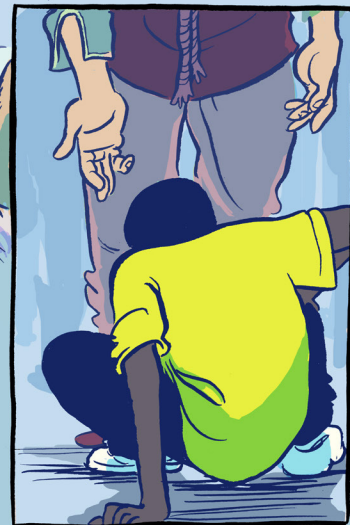


Don't you
run ahead
of me, Sam.



SAM.









Though you have
saved the people
of our village...



...your damage
was great.

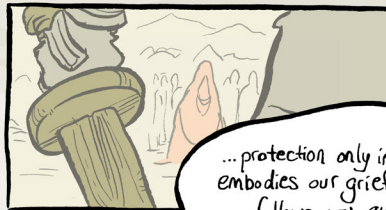


You have our
thanks and our
prayers, yet...

our ancient
code persists.

You are to leave
our borders - and
must never return.

And so, we present
to you this ceremonial
wooden sword...



...protection only in how it
embodies our grief as it
follows you away.

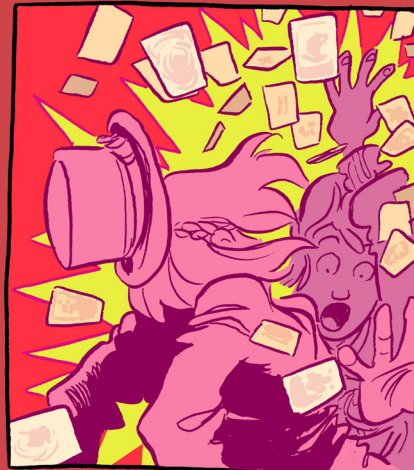
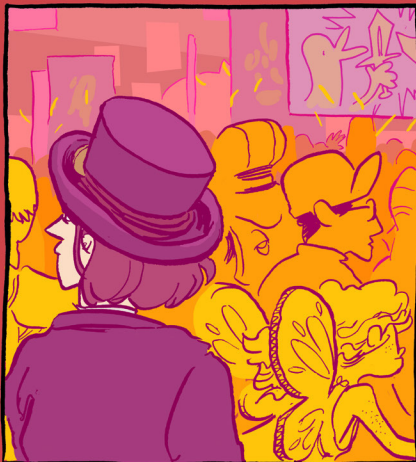


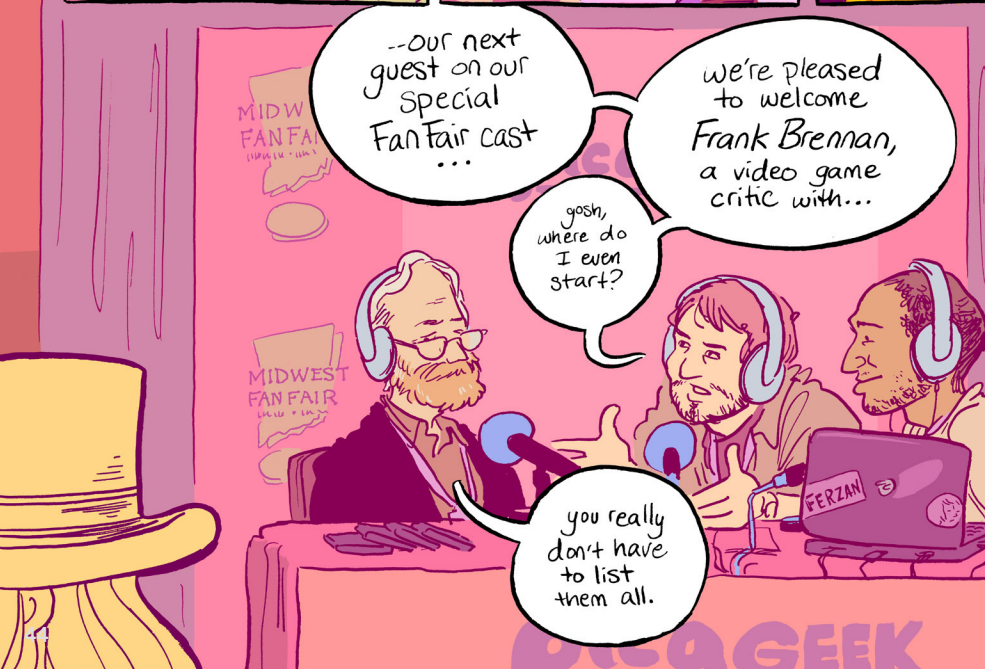
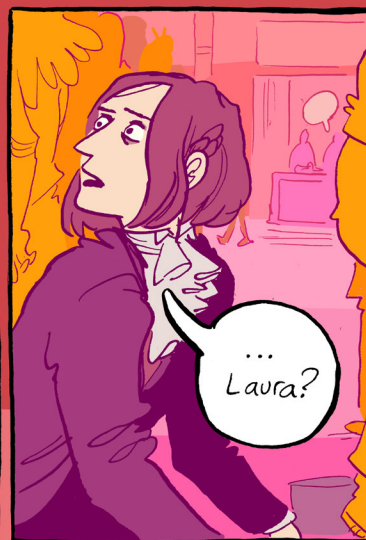
Anything
good in
there?

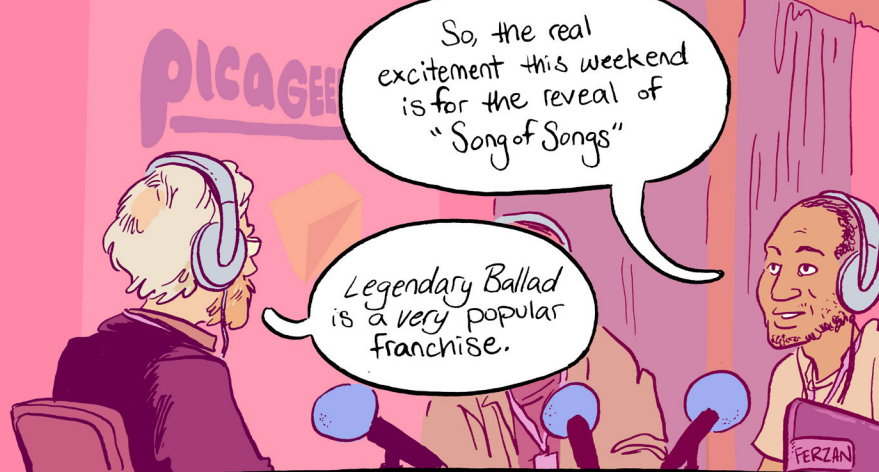
Who
cares?
It's free!



WEDNESDAY - 4:02PM







So, the real excitement this weekend is for the reveal of "Song of Songs"

Legendary Ballad is a very popular franchise.



gimme a break.



It doesn't have the cachet of certain other series -

in what we often awkwardly call the "JRPG" genre, but...

Now for those of us that aren't familiar...



From Micropedia, the free encyclopedia

Legendary Ballad is a **media franchise** created by Canadian maverick designer **Frank Sturm** and Japanese programming legend **Hitoshi Soryo**. Over twenty years old, the franchise includes **video games**, **comic book** tie-ins from both sides of the Pacific, a controversial **anime** series, and three poor-performing **motion pictures**.

Begun in 1987 by Sturm's company "Bardic Expressions" (Now [BE Entertainment](#))^[1] with a single and, for its time, revolutionary console [role-playing game](#) (RPG), the franchise found widespread mainstream success with their fourth title in the series, when Soryo joined the company, adding his sense of story to the series^[2]. The fourth installment, [The Legendary Ballad: Canon of the Five Kingdoms](#), also marked a shift in the franchise, beginning to tie the games together in an epic saga which now incorporates thirty-one different variations on the story of a single fantasy setting, with a forthcoming thirty-second chapter (reported to be its last)^[CITATION NEEDED]

Contents [\[hide\]](#)

1 Titles

1.1 Games

1.1.1 Main series

3.1 Music

4 Reception

4.1 Critical response

My friend,
he comes home
from his set
one night,
right?

And apparently
Someone'd broken
into his place.

LEGENDARY BALLAD

Genres	Role-playing game
--------	-------------------

Dr. [redacted] BE Entertainment

Producers BE Entertainment

Creators Frank Sturm
Hitori Soryo

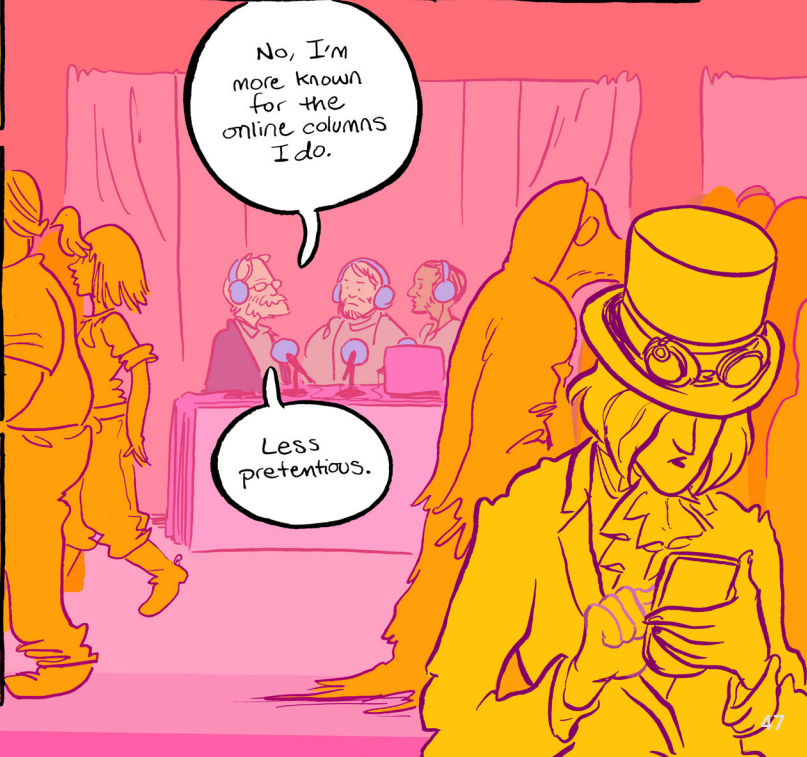
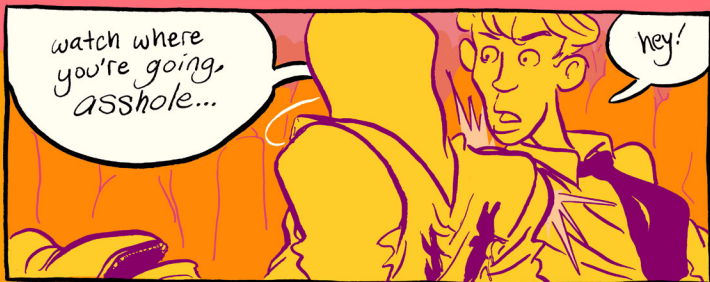
Platforms Obake Crystal, Game Boy

But here's the weird thing about it.

But here's
the weird thing
about it.

Now, you have
a soft spot for
this genre.

Well, my first published paper was on them, yeah.



more detailed in appearance and express more emotions [44].



Sequels and spin-offs

See also: [Category: Legendary Ballad](#)

The games themselves will, upon the final chapter, cover at ten primary chapters in the story with over a dozen [spin-off](#) titles in various genres such as [real-time strategy](#) (RTS), [fighting games](#), an all-ages [simulation](#) (or "sim") game, and a [massively-multiplayer online game](#) (MMORPG) which was shut down after eight months due to poor sales and accusations of dangerously negligent [moderation](#) [47]. Although the games vary greatly in scope, style, and mechanics, they all share a number of similar tropes, including time travel, the "Myth" summon deities, and the elite "Stag Rider" soliders.

[\[edit\]](#)

References

- ↑ Brennan, Franklin. "Twenty Years of Alternate History and the Song Remains the Same," Mapping the Realms [✉](#). [rpg.avatar.us](#) - Retrieved on November 5, 2007.
- ↑ Marra, Thomas. "The Upstart: Obake's Western Takeover," MIT Press, 2004.
- ↑ Jenkins, Christian. "Legendary Ballad" [✉](#). Virgin Media. Retrieved on November 5, 2007.
- ↑ "Legendary Ballad" [✉](#). 1UP.com. Retrieved on November 5, 2007.
- ↑ Alexandria, "Legendary Ballad II" [✉](#).
- ↑ BradyGames. "Legendary Ballad Official Strategy Guide." ISBN 1-56686-925-0.
- ↑ Lodacal, Bill; Focal Press/Elsevier. ISBN 1-56686-925-0.
- ↑ Cassady, Michael. (1999). *Legendary Ballad Symphony Collection Official Strategy Guide*. BradyGames. ISBN 1-56686-925-0.
- ↑ Sutcliffe, "Legendary Ballad" [✉](#).
- ↑ "25 Most Overrated Games of All Time". GameSpy. September 2003.
- ↑ "25 Most Underrated Games of All Time". GameSpy. October 2003.
- ↑ "Sex-Addled Teens Topple Japanese Goliath," Wired, April 2006.

what we call the "RPG formula" is actually integral to many game genres now.

So frequently, when we talk about these games now, we talk about tropes.

page

[What's this?](#)

Did you find what you were looking for?

Yes

No

got some
to it past
le scale --
he whole
many and is
ies' battle
markable,
es that
the series





Sad,
really.

The
poor
boy

is he
...
hunting?



of
sorts.

but to
no end.



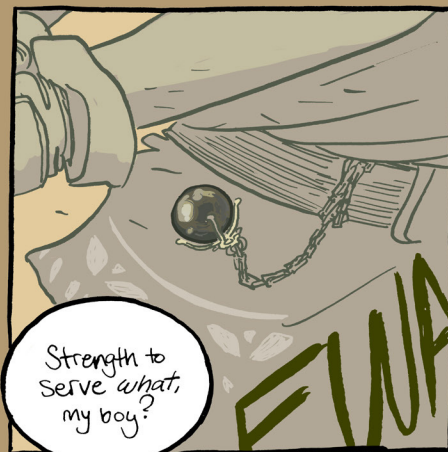
tsk,
what a
waste.

Not even
claiming
the pelts.



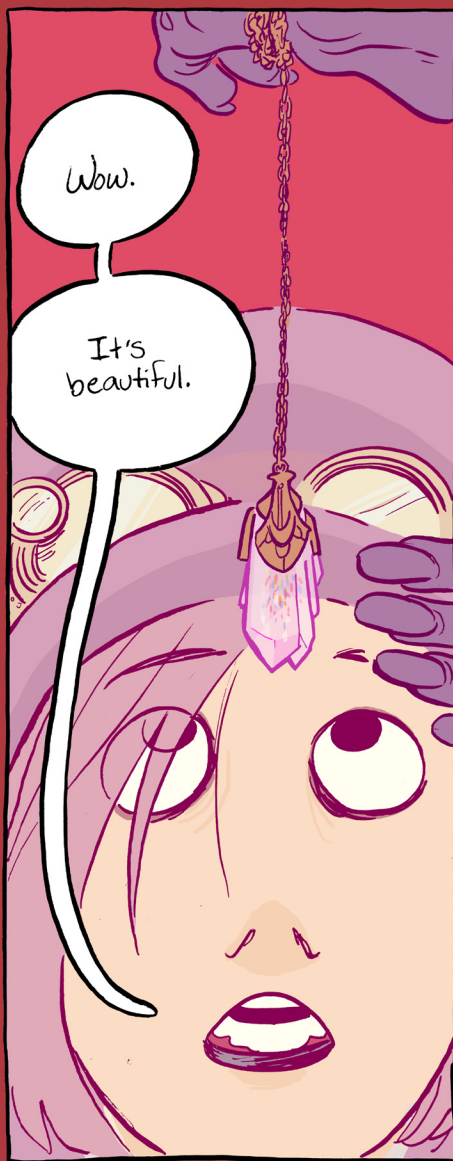
Come now,
come now.

He'll get
better with
that sword.



Strength to
serve what,
my boy?

"This boy has lost something,
he may never retrieve..."



GRANT HOLLEY

SN: POWDERDPOWER
POST COUNT: 892



IVAN WRIGHT

SN: 86_M
POST COUNT: 1914



She's here,
and you won't
believe who
ELSE



I'm
telling
you!

It could
be a real
coup
to--

I said
"no" already,
jeez!

MARIE STRIMPLE

SN: COSPLAY_CUTIE
POST COUNT: 671



It's a fairly
common belief
now, that...

these games
are kind of
... out of step.

For western
audiences,
you mean.



Sorry I missed
the drink up
last night, by
the way, got
in late



heh, I
heard YOU
had quite

Please
shut up
now.

BE_Entertainment
 Don't miss our panel with BE
 president Robert Ellis!
[#LegendaryBallad](#) [#SongofSongs](#)
[#MidwestFanFair](#)
 23 seconds ago from web



parttimemistrs
[@combatmagewoman](#) [@joannsbitch](#)
 GODDAMMIT KENDRA
 1 minute ago from web



combatmagewoman
 Lost [@joannsbitch](#) thirty seconds into
 convention
 7 minutes ago from Obaque Monsterphone

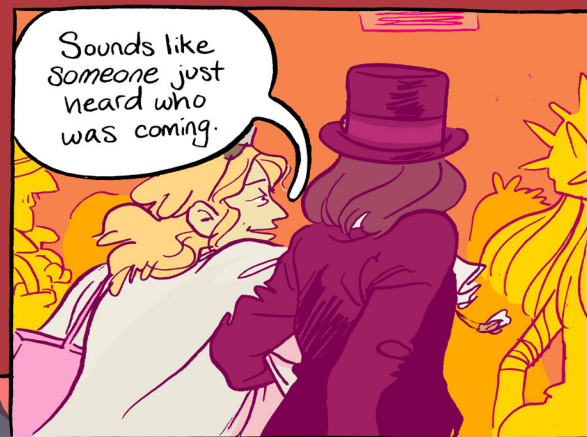


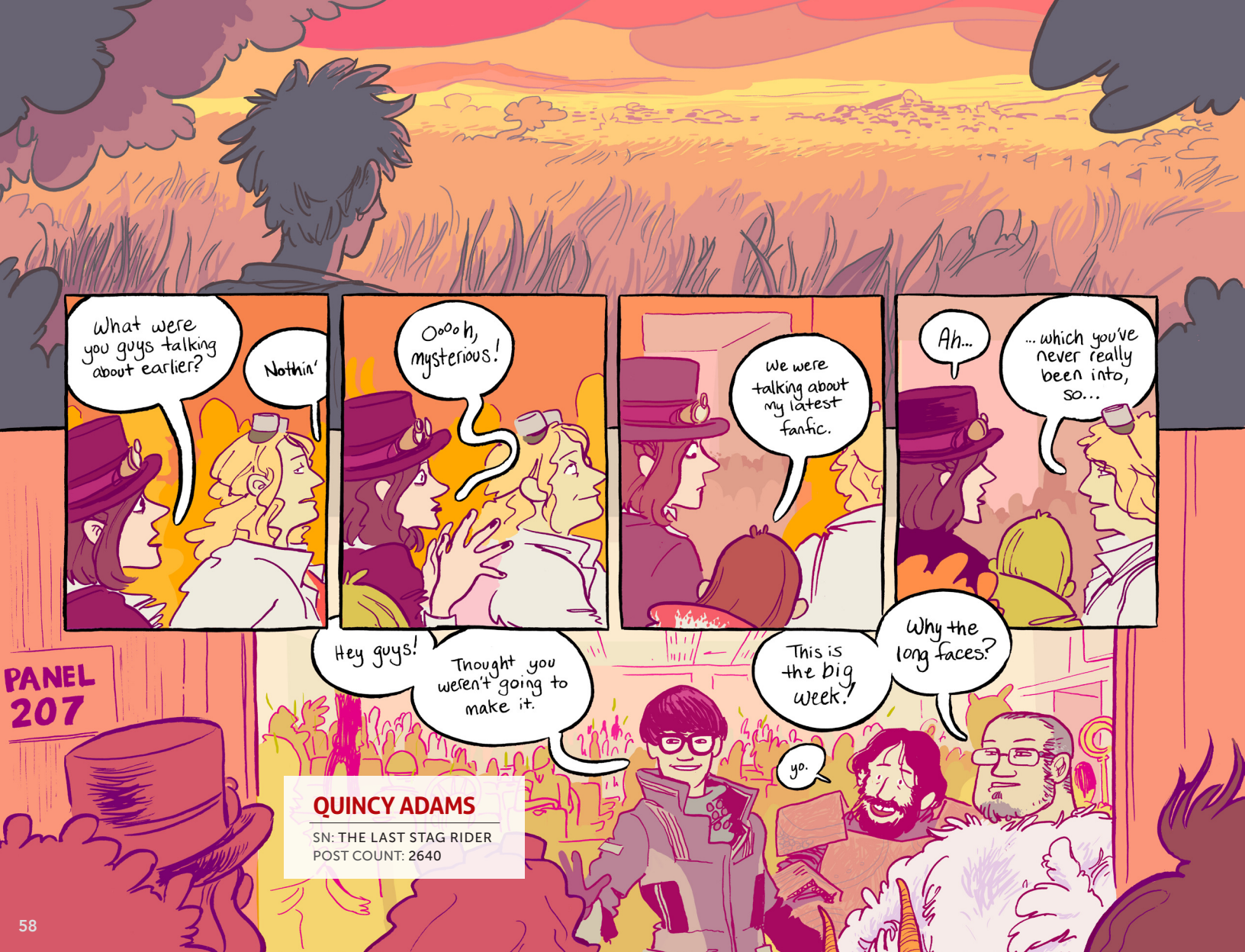
tigers
 "It's not like it's gonna be a cakewalk
 We have to continue to play our











What were you guys talking about earlier?

Nothin'

Ooooh, mysterious!

We were talking about my latest fanfic.

Ah...

...which you've never really been into, so...

Hey guys!

Thought you weren't going to make it.

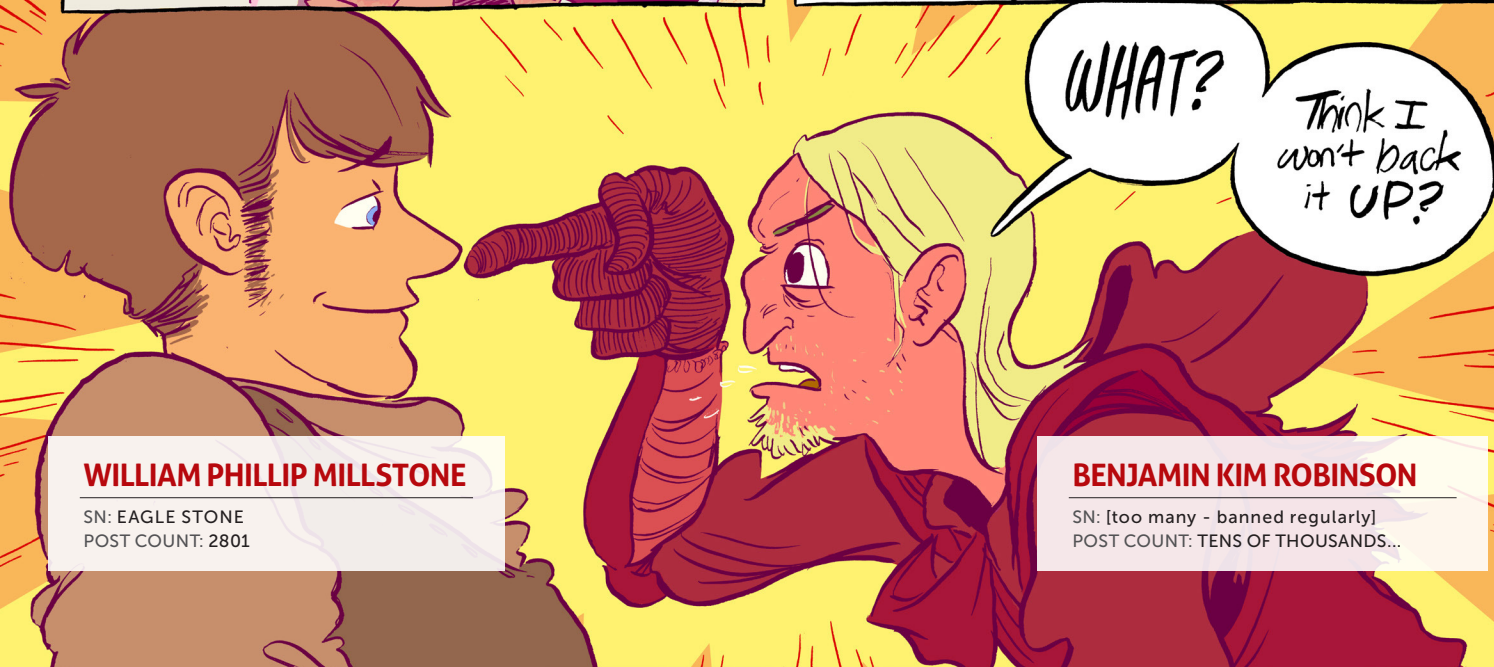
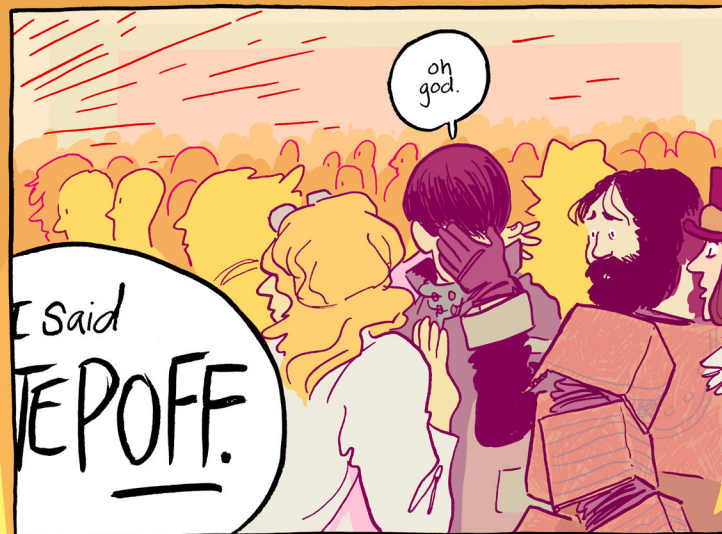
This is the big week!

Why the long faces?

yo.

PANEL 207

QUINCY ADAMS
SN: THE LAST STAG RIDER
POST COUNT: 2640



WILLIAM PHILLIP MILLSTONE

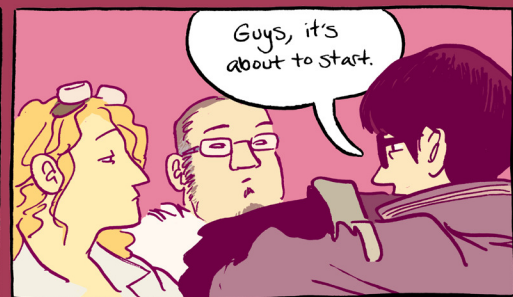
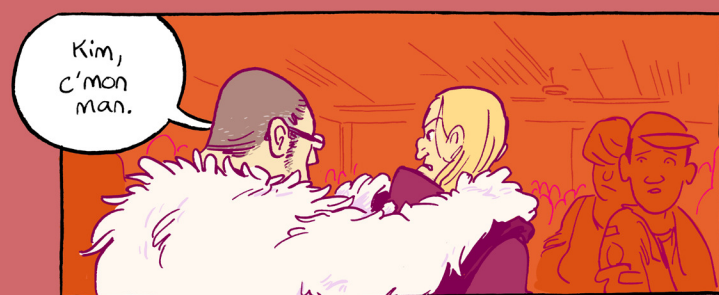
SN: EAGLE STONE
POST COUNT: 2801

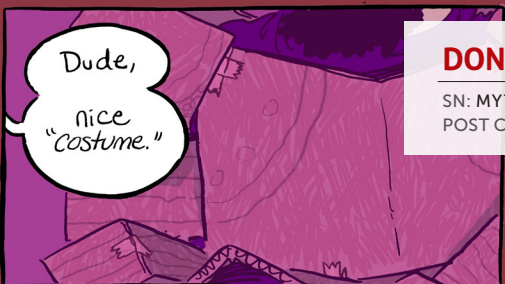
BENJAMIN KIM ROBINSON

SN: [too many - banned regularly]
POST COUNT: TENS OF THOUSANDS...



He lives in Chicago, it's like an hour drive.







You guys
are all so
hard on him,
y'know?



THERE
she is.

"Team Mom"
in action,
huh?



Nnnnnn.



I like your
costume...

One of the
"Velvet Gears,"
right?

More
or less.

You look
good-

too bad
we have
no chance.



Aw,
don't be
like that.

What,
realistic?



So he says, there's just this phantom shampoo bottle!

That is creepy AND hilarious.

What would YOU do?

neh neh, I... uh...

neh, jeez...



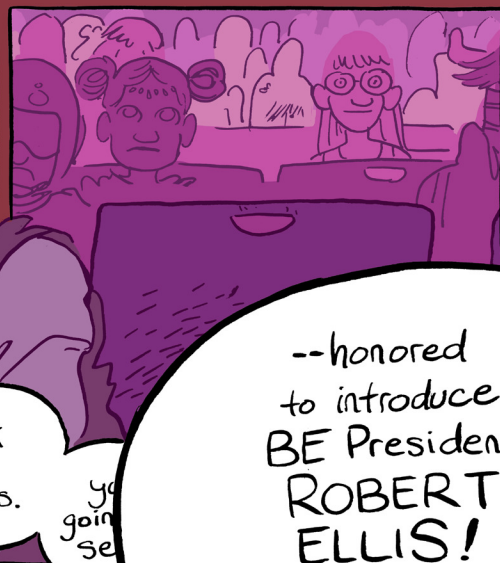
I'm saying!



There's too much to wrap up!

Yeah, but they always start over fresh.

Mark my words.



--honored to introduce BE President, **ROBERT ELLIS!**



Thank you.

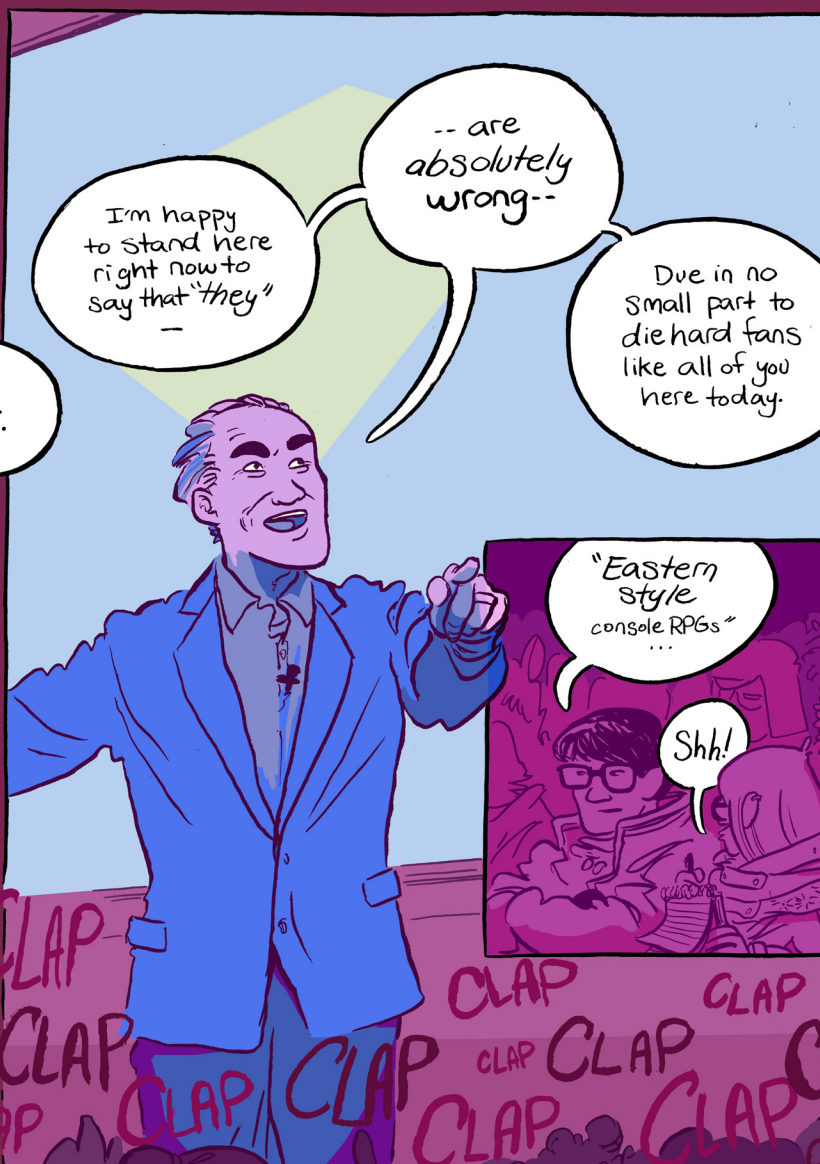
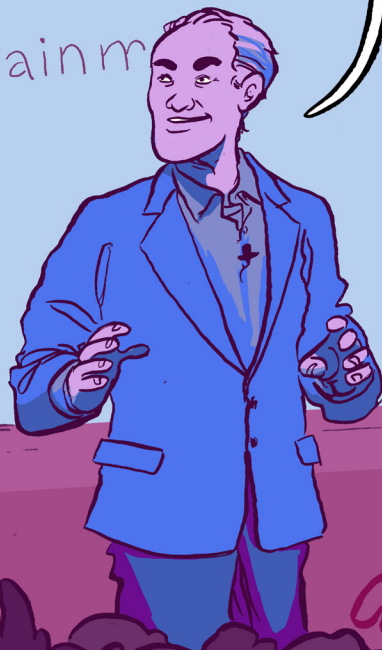
Thank you.

They say...

that the days
of the more
traditional
console RPGs
--

-- are
over.

entertainm



I'm happy
to stand here
right now to
say that "they"
--

-- are
absolutely
wrong--

Due in no
small part to
die hard fans
like all of you
here today.

"Eastern
style
console RPGs"
...

Shh!

When it comes to games on the home console --

-- it was games like

--
it was games like
Frank Sturm's original
"Legendary Ballad"
that introduced
the importance
of story.

--
it was games like
Frank Sturm's original
"Legendary Ballad"
that introduced
the importance
of story.

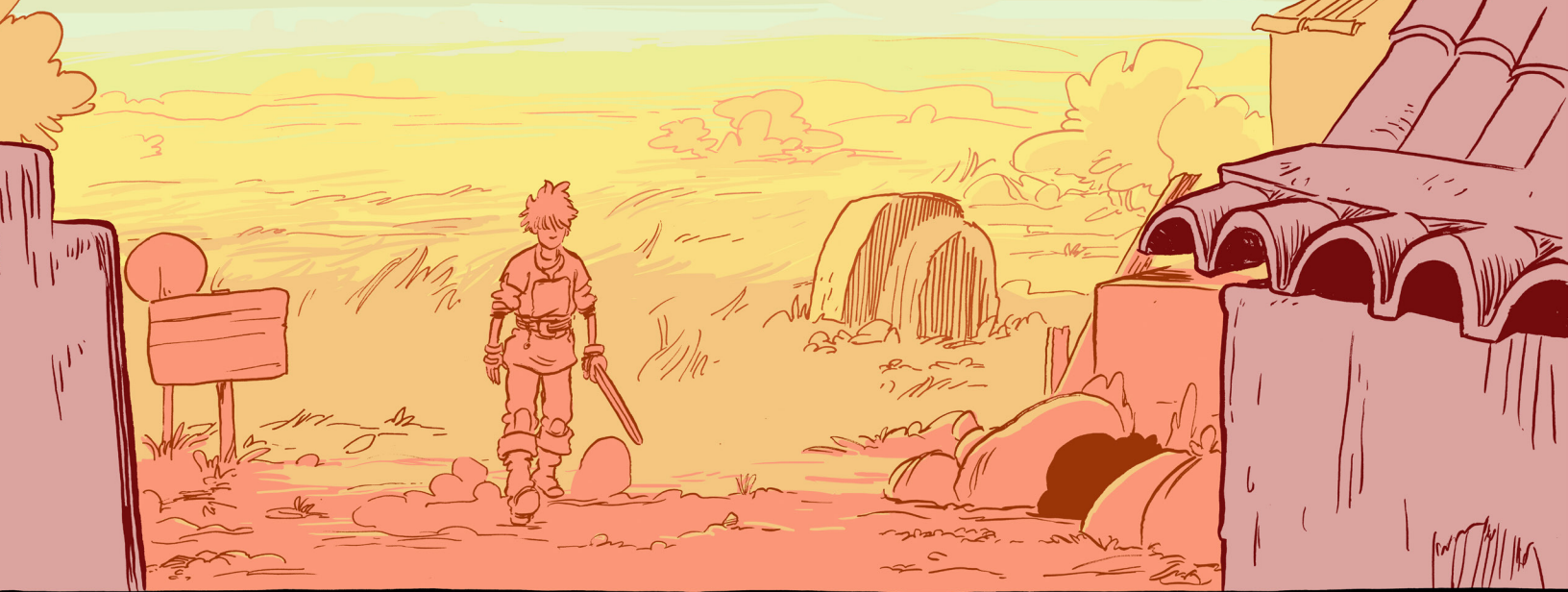
Now...

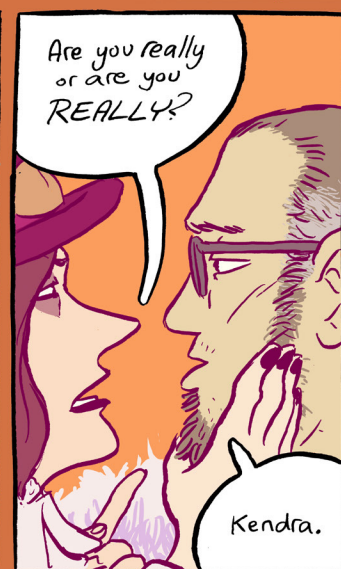
... one of you will
get the chance to be
the first person in
the world--

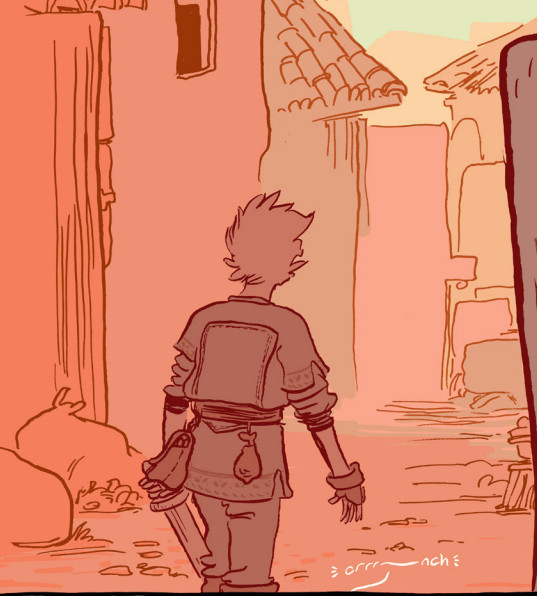
--
(outside of
our staff,
of course)
--

--to play through to the end,

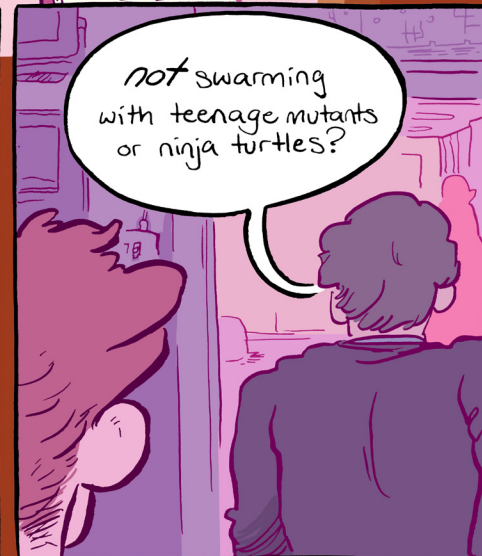
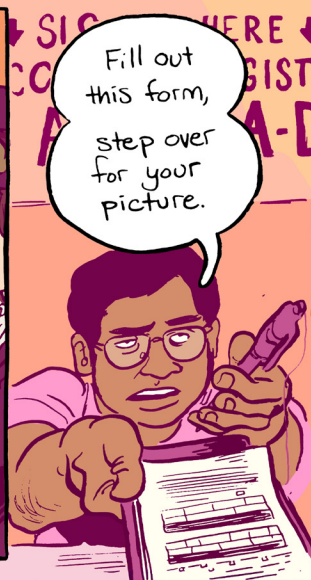
and learn
the true fate
of the world of
Aureline!







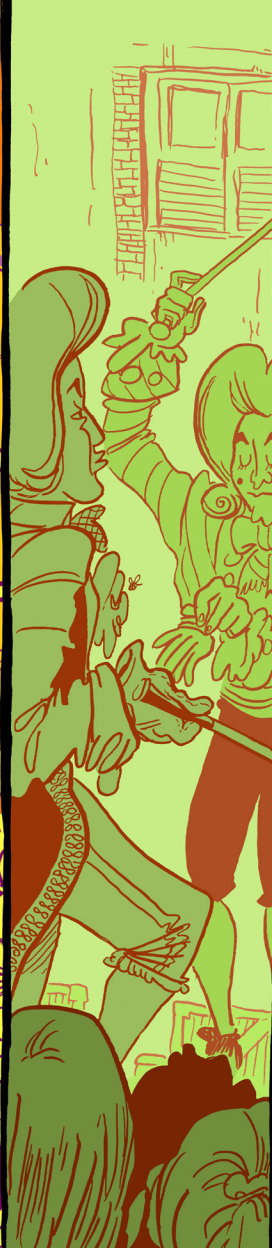














I guess she's with that other forum, what's it called?

"Time and Space River, A+ My Hands"

Wow, pretentious.



It's just...

It wasn't just that she was a bitch.



She was a really boring, predictable one.



Lame.



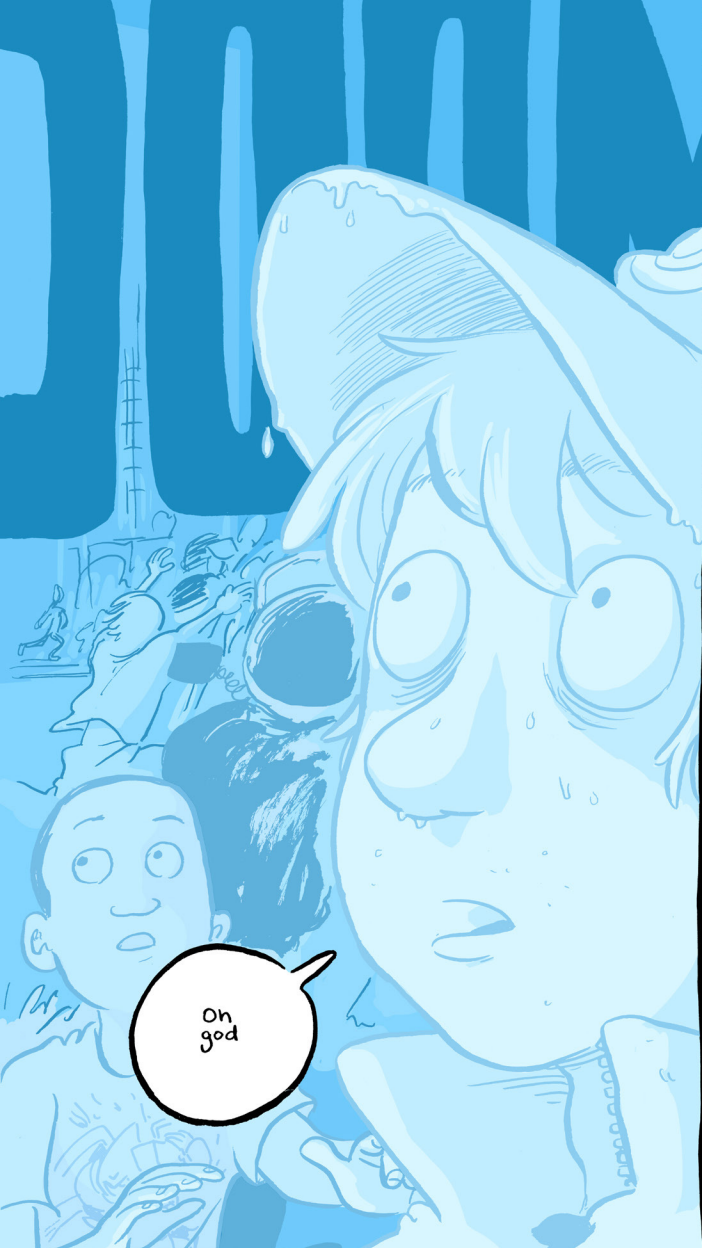
WELL, it looks like we have an unofficial rivalry...



... and since William has established that "internet honor" is so important to him...

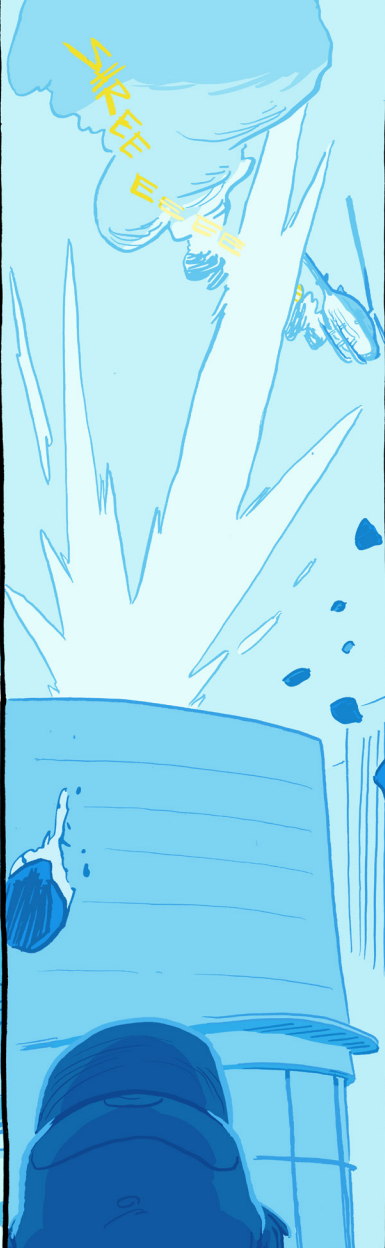
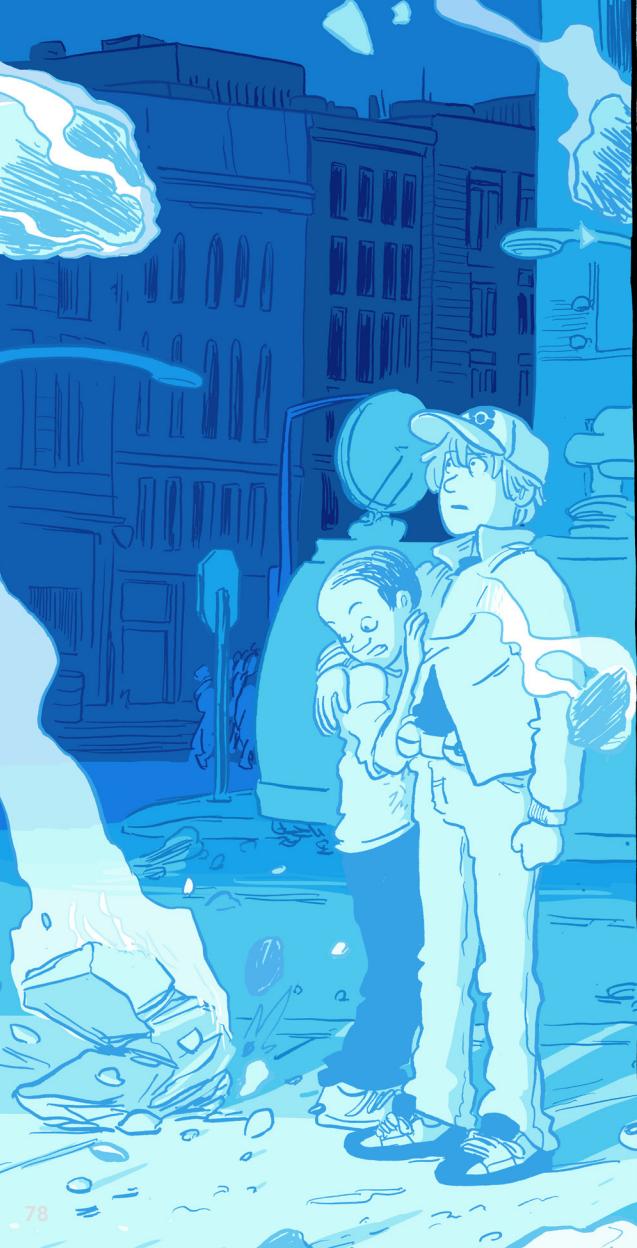
Hey!





SUNDAY -
10:23PM



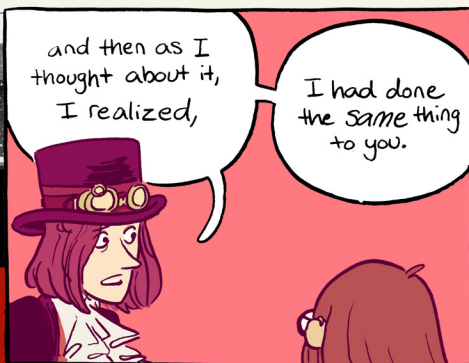
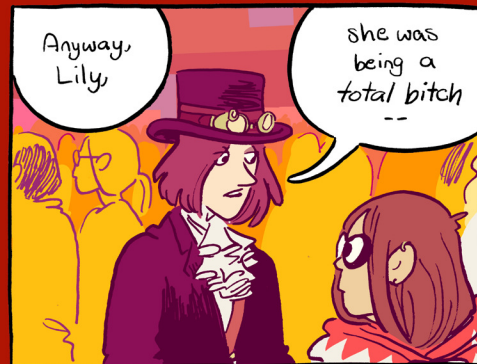


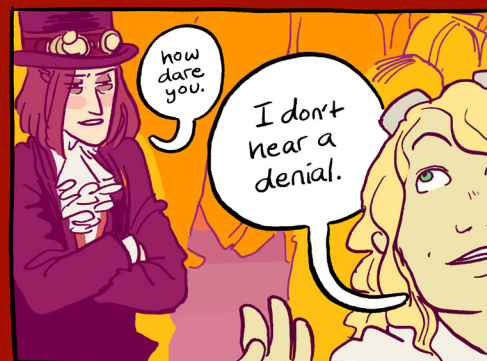
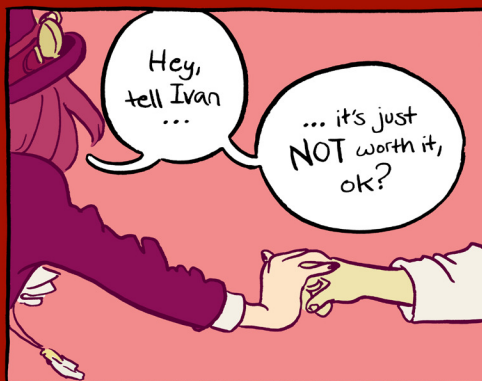
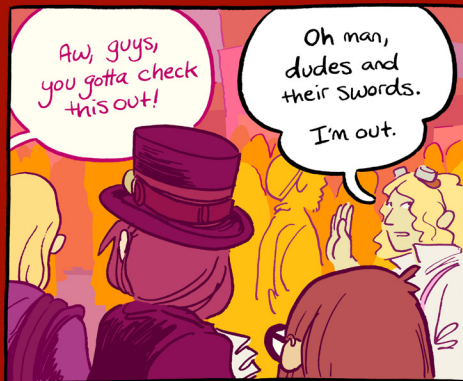
WEDNESDAY -
6:04PM

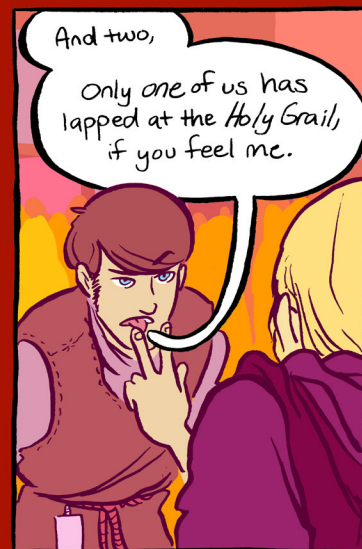
combatmagewoman

Preview night is busier than I thought it'd be - people hunting exclusives, or other contest entrants? @Stag_OnTheHorn is going to investigate #MidwestFunFair

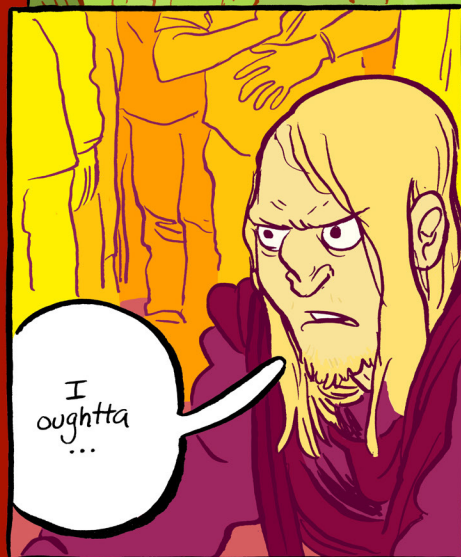
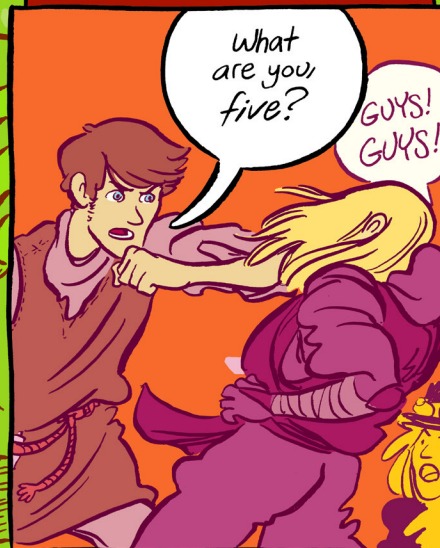
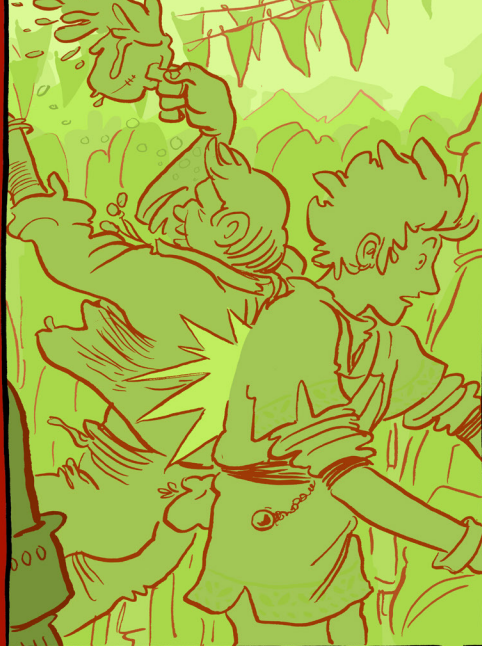
31 seconds ago from Obake Monsterphone





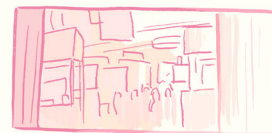




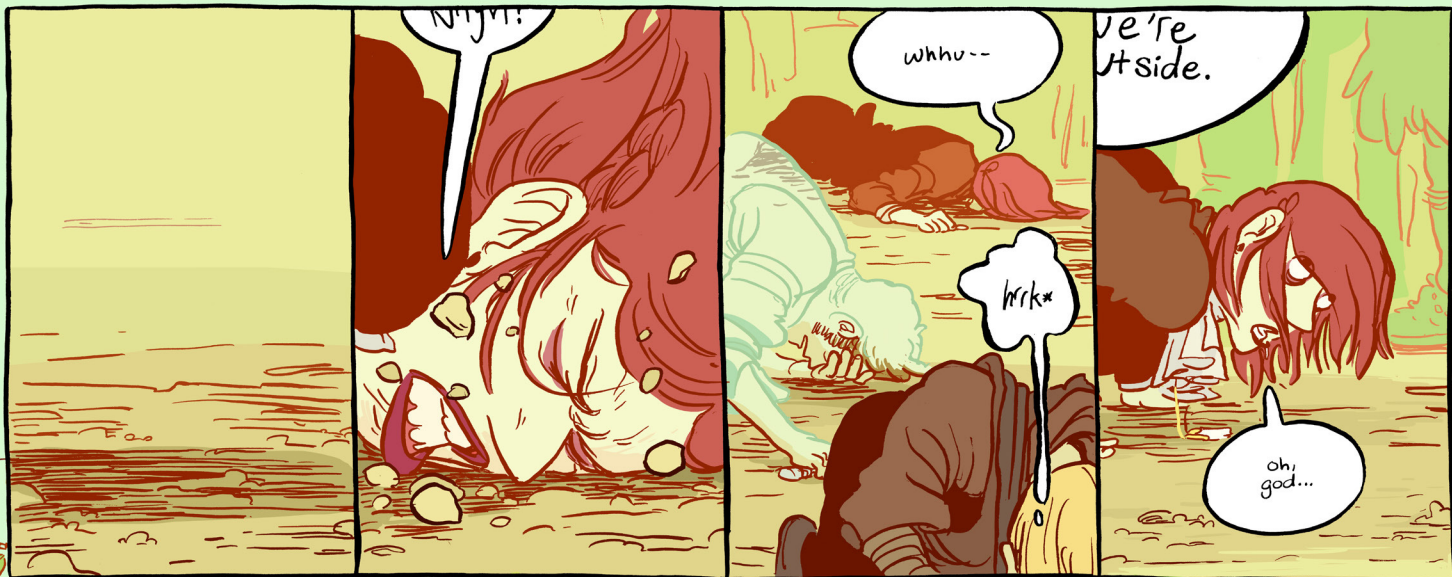












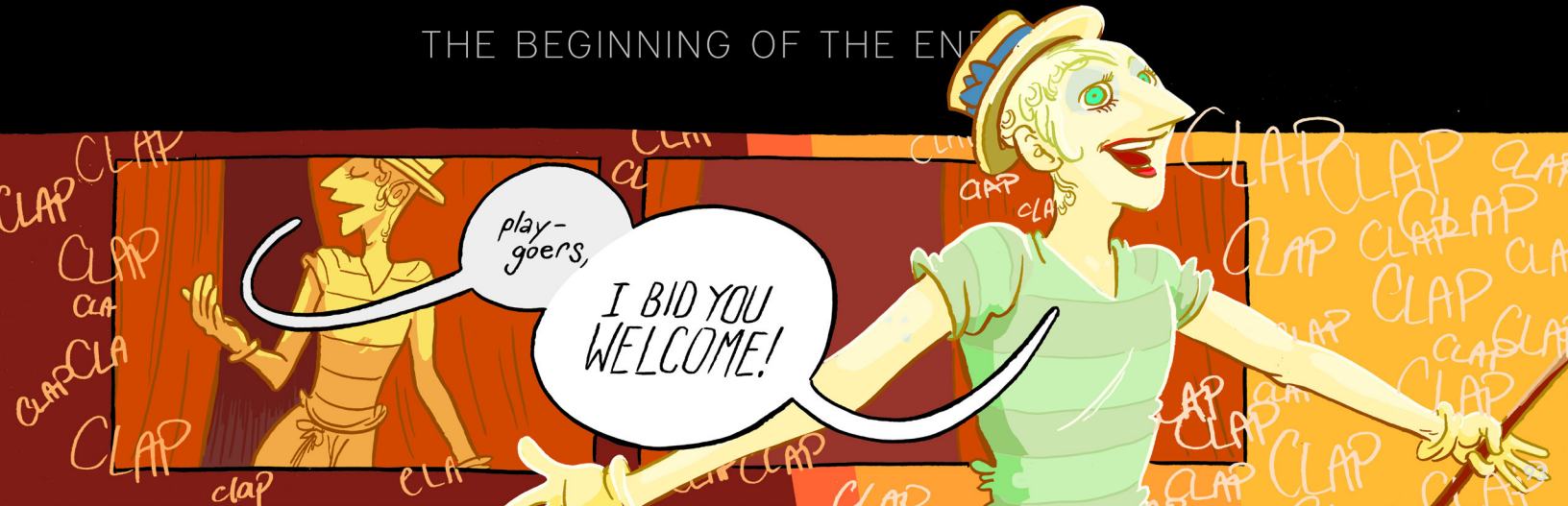


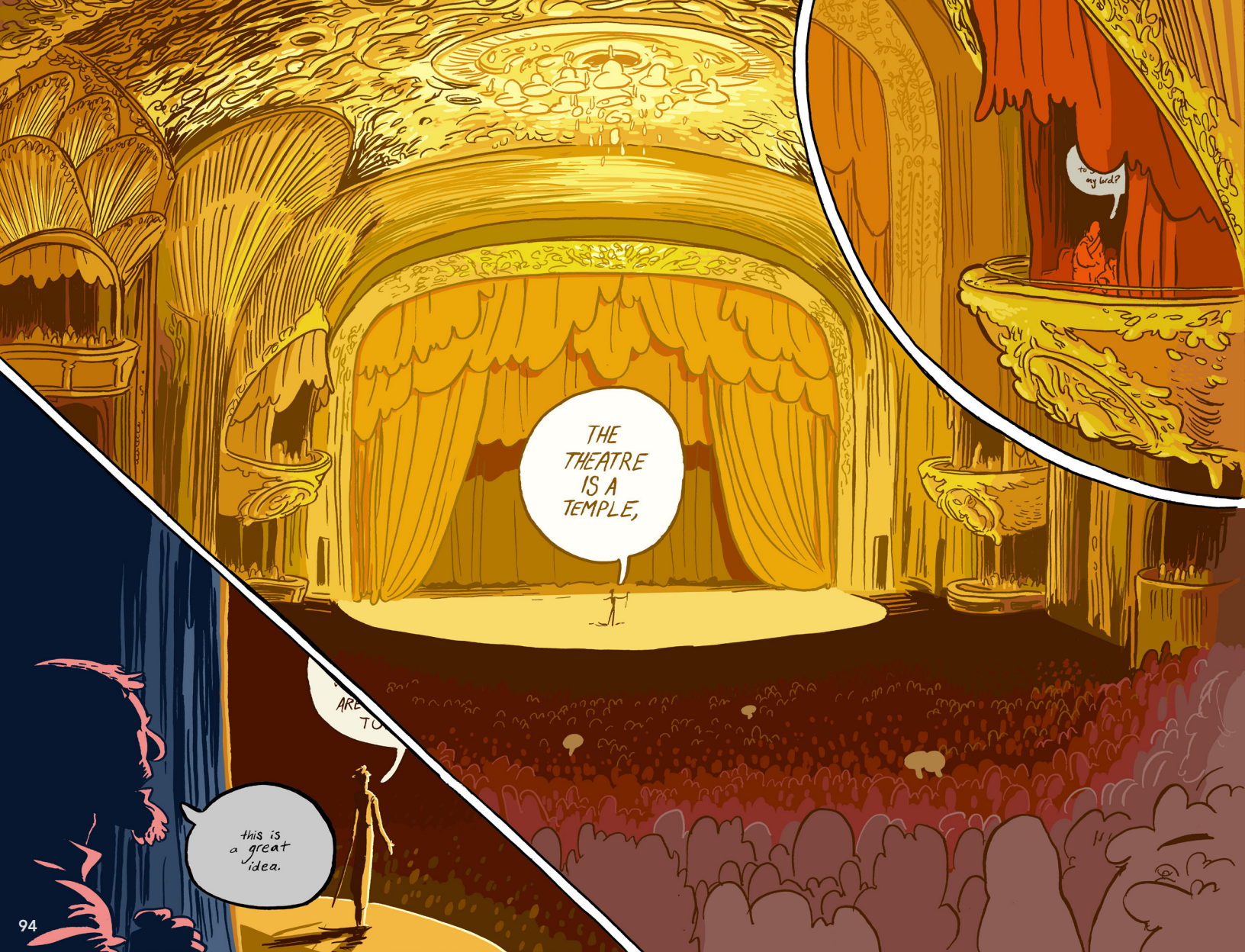


INTERMISSION ONE



THE BEGINNING OF THE END





THE
THEATRE
IS A
TEMPLE,

this is
a great
idea.

to my lord?

ARE
TO



m-m-
my
lord?

TO SHOW
OUR SIMPLE
SKILL,

THAT
THE TRUE
BEGINNING
OF OUR END...

LL FOR
YOUR
DELIGHT
...

I despise
this part
of the
performance.

eh?

WE ARE
NOT HERE!

This
bit.

the,
the apology.

the
disclaimer.

WE ARE
NOT HERE!

this is such
a terrible,
stupid
idea.



I mean,
to perform
this show
on *this* night
of all nights,
th...

It's what
the Mayor
requested.

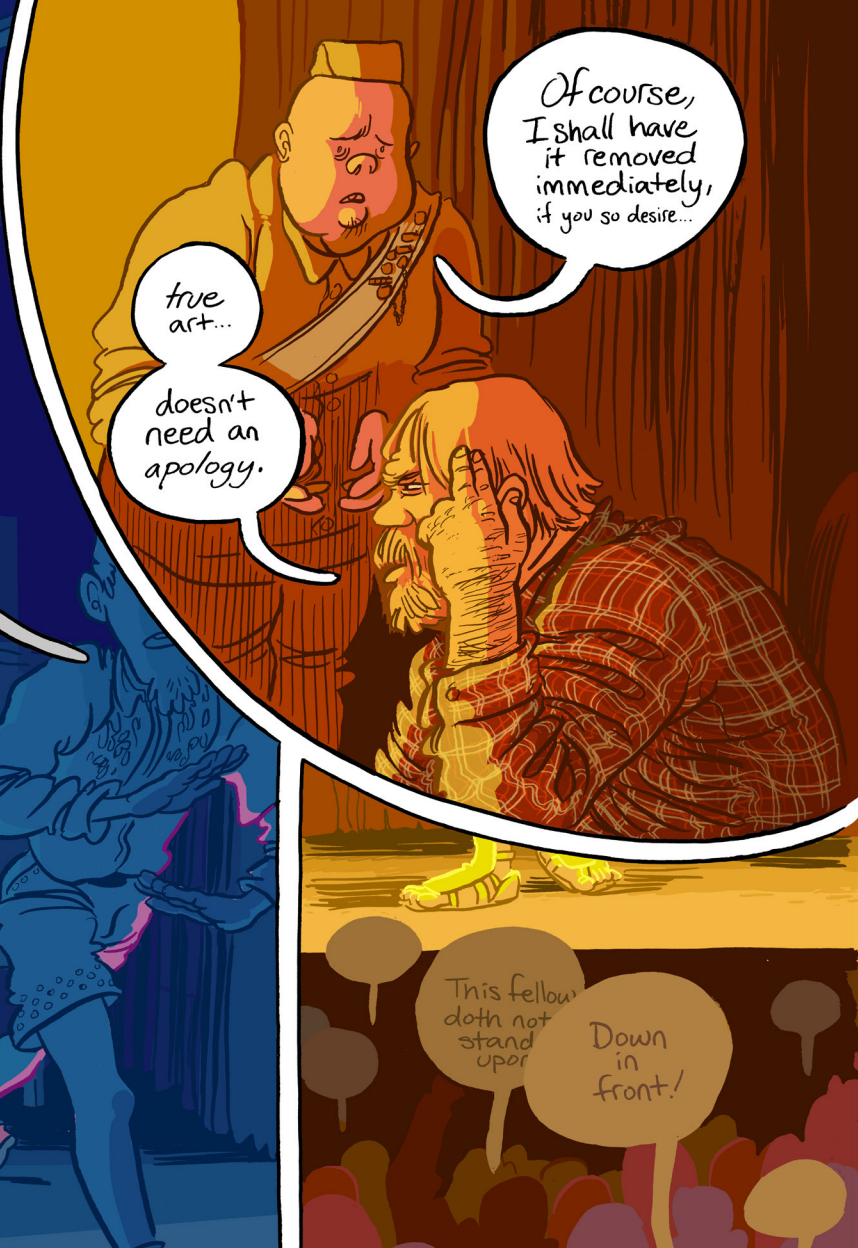


No, I'm
sorry, I'm
not doing
this.

I'm
out.

No, NO!

The canary is
for next week's
production!



Of course,
I shall have
it removed
immediately,
if you so desire...

true
art...

doesn't
need an
apology.



This fellow
doth not
stand
upon

Down
in
front!



Sigh

Mayor
Nidhoggr...

I pity
you.
Truly.



if y're to
ask me,
all superstitions
nogwash.



Oh,
it's like
any other
tradition.

self-fulfilling
prophecy,
y'know?



WE SHALL
EMPLOY EVERY
DEVICE WE KNOW

IN OUR
DESIRE
TO DIVERT
YOU!



"Froyo,"

fetch
the
girl.

I
was
marvelous
if I do
say so myself.

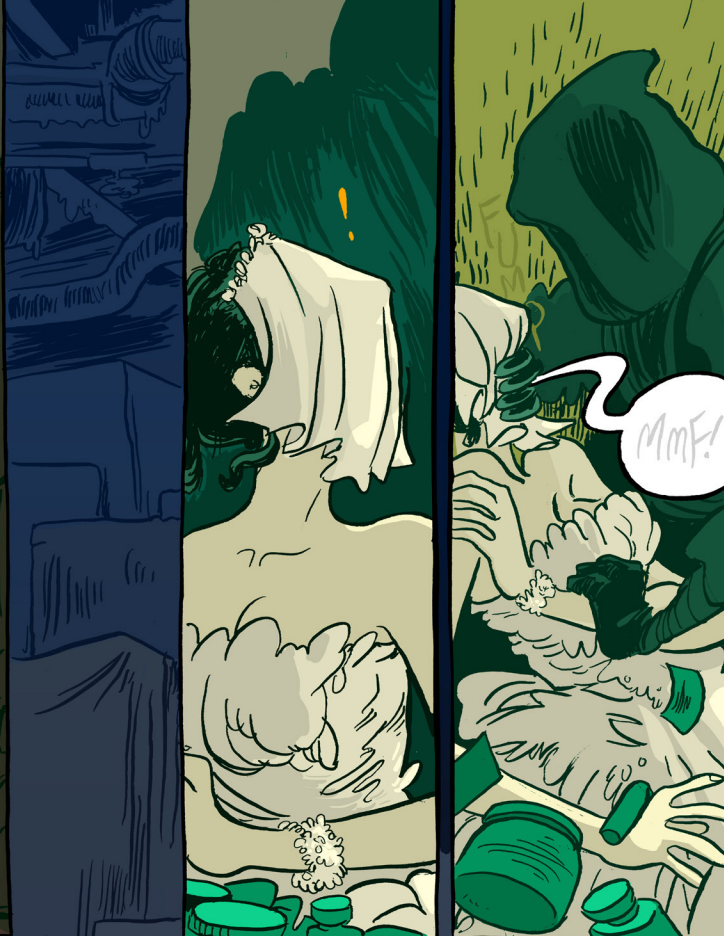
Cal, do-
do you
think he'll
...

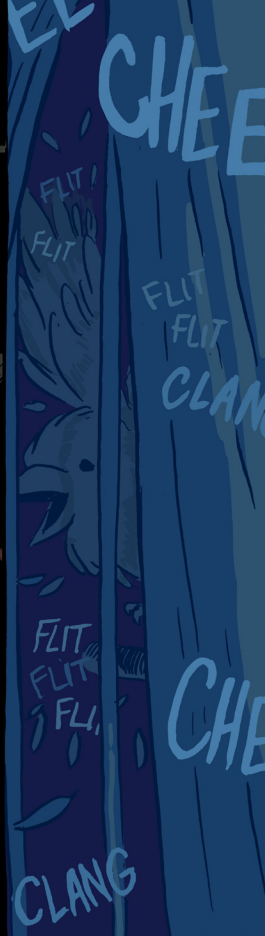
CLAP
CLAP
CLAP
CLAP
CLAP
CLAP

There's no way
he could, darling,
she'll be going on
any minute now.

You're all so
edgy tonight.

You're going to bring
us bad luck.





END INTERMISSION

Cast of Characters

Main Party



Kendra Price

Attending the convention at least in part to escape the reality of her parents' ugly divorce; Kendra is terrific at taking care of other people and not so much at taking care of herself. She has a regrettable flair for the melodramatic, and a surprising set of skills. Call her the "team mom" at your own peril.

AGE: 19
HOMETOWN: Ann Arbor, MI
FAVORITE RPG: Persona 3 FES
FORUM HANDLE: combatmagewoman
BLOOD TYPE: O
CAREER GOALS: n/a



William Phillip Millstone

Handsome, charming – only very occasionally insufferable. William wants to be a hero more than is probably healthy... he's friendly and open-hearted, but he's carrying something heavy inside that he's not anxious to share. Does his contempt for Kim stem from Kim's attitude, or something else?

AGE: 21
HOMETOWN: New Haven, CT
FAVORITE RPG: Final Fantasy VI
FORUM HANDLE: Eagle Stone
TAROT CARD: Emperor
NET WORTH: Doesn't like to talk about it.



Benjamin Kim Robinson

An all-but-professional asshole online, and plenty antagonistic offline as well. Kim has a chip on his shoulder that's roughly the size of an SUV. He might not be liked, but nobody knows the games better than he does... at least, that's how he sees it.

AGE: 17
HOMETOWN: Chicago, IL
FAVORITE RPG: Tales of Game's Presents Chef Boyardee's Barkley, Shut Up and Jame: Gaiden, Chapter 1 of the Hoopz Barkley SaGa
FORUM HANDLE: n/a (Dozens, at least)
ZODIAC SIGN: Pisces
NUMBER OF TIME HIS NOSE HAS BEEN BROKEN: Six... no, seven.



???

"..."

(He doesn't seem to have much to say right now)

AGE: ???
HOMETOWN: A little village nestled in the Valley of the Saints

Cast of Characters

The White Table



Quincy Adams

AGE: 26

FORUM HANDLE: The Last Stag Rider

The unofficial leader of the White Table forum and its members at the convention. Charming; he hides his depression pretty well, most of the time anyway. On the forum, often plays the bad cop to Kendra's good cop.

Ivan Wright

AGE: 29

FORUM HANDLE: 86_M

Warm and always ready with a funny story to tell, Ivan is the most well-liked member of the White Table. More interested in having a good time than winning the contest, he still somehow finds himself a magnet for other people's drama.

Laura Douglas

AGE: 21

FORUM HANDLE: MaldavirsDaughter

Kendra got her into these games, yes, but she mostly just enjoys the community. Brash and forward; maybe overcompensating. Her best friend takes care of everyone but herself – Laura takes care of her in turn.

Grant Holley

AGE: 20

FORUM HANDLE: PowderDPower

Awkward and still trying to find his place in the group. Has a lot on his mind these days.

Don Greenwood

AGE: 36

FORUM HANDLE: mythman7

Divorced dad, in financial straits, and looking for a few days escape. Secretly suspects the others are pitying him, but resolved to enjoy himself anyway.

Lily Stokes

AGE: 17

FORUM HANDLE: Thessaly

Has a habit of fading into the background; but not actually that shy, or that passive. Beloved in the fan community, less so at her school. Has a rich fantasy life.

Marie Strimple

AGE: 18

FORUM HANDLE: Cosplay_Cutie

Beautiful, and swiftly making a name for herself for her costume design; she's not as innocent as she comes across, but not nearly as jaded and clever as she thinks she is.

The Only Way to Travel



The middle of the night, and the only thing visible was the sharp neon of Cleveland Browns Stadium. Quincy Adams removed his glasses, wiped at his eyes. It was the trip's halfway mark, and he was among a collection of riders who'd stepped out to stretch their legs. It was summer, but his arms were cold. Maybe the wind was trapped between train cars or something, but he now wished he hadn't left his old suede jacket on his seat inside. Quincy scratched at his goosebumps, realized his nails needed clipping, and sighed.

The other passengers were clustered by the conductor, smoking desperately-anticipated cigarettes and making jokes about the man running the snack bar on this route, who had a lazy eye and kept hitting on the teenage girls two cars down, who were part of some outreach group or something. One of said passengers was the woman who had the seat next to Quincy, and she offered him a weak smile, from which the world's longest and thinnest ultra-light bobbed and weaved like a flagpole in a cartoon.

He fished the Obake Monsterphone out of his pocket and checked his e-mail. Three suggestions from Kendra, one complaint from Ivan, and one request for help from Don. No uses of the phrase "thank you."

Quincy sighed, glanced upward, and was surprised to see that a few of the stars had emerged from the dark matter that hovered above every city. There was a grouping that had to be Orion's belt, suspended at an angle that evoked a diving plane's signal lights. When he blinked, there was a dryness around his eyes and down his cheeks that felt dirty. He needed a shower. He hadn't had the chance for one before he left, and the day before he... just hadn't had the energy for it. God, he hadn't realized, she must be able to smell it on him.

The others were beginning to board. They were making good time, so far. He waited as long as the conductor would let him, standing alone in the darkness.

Quincy used to romanticize the Lake Shore Limited – the train line that runs from Boston to Chicago, with stops including (for Quincy's purposes here) Fusco, Indiana – when he was a teenager, because it was a central setting in one of his favorite books. The late Patch Brennan's only finished graphic novel, *The Things You Leave Behind*, a big ambitious mess of a thing, opened with the protagonist (based on the author) riding this same train, back when it still had an open

smoking lounge; he was sitting amongst a group of colorful passengers, whose stories brushed up against his as the book became a huge genre-blending, metafictional thing – but he was emotionally detached from them, viewed them as small pieces in the puzzle of the life he was trying to put back together.

The first time that Quincy himself ran away from home, this was the train that he boarded; there was still a smoking lounge, at that point, but nobody was allowed to use it after Amtrak banned smoking on their trains. He'd put his hands on the glass partition and tried to judge whether the artist's interpretation matched the real thing. In the end, he was let down. In order to give the panels the right amount of negative space, in order to pace the images properly, the artist had made the lounge far too big. Seeing that small enclosure in person was how he imagined adults felt when they returned to their childhood homes.

His parents – or “parents” as he'd have said then – figured out pretty quickly where he'd gone. They didn't get to South Station before the train left, but they caught up with him down the line. By the time the train had reached Albany, where it took on extra cars, his parents were there to drag him off in the throes of a full-on tantrum. He wouldn't ride the train again until

the first time he headed out for a Fan Fair.

There was a lot less romance in it now. He was old enough to understand that adventure carried with it *inconveniences*, and awful chemical toilet bathrooms (like the one that Patch flashed back to when he was using the bedpan in his New Hampshire hospital room!) were the least of it. The seats were killing him. Their fold-up leg rests were not making it any easier to sleep. He was sitting, with his face pressed awkwardly against curtains with burlap texture, thumbing through apps on his phone without selecting any.

He hadn't slept in close to three days.

“You know that I would've kept you company. Rode down with you.” William's voice sounded distracted on the other end.

“Oh, no, it's fine... I have to get in early, you know. Set everything up for you guys.”

“How much work can it really be? Most of the reservations are done online long in advance, right?” Dismissive. Quincy could practically hear his eyes rolling. Well, heart was in the right place. Probably.

“For the hotels and stuff, yeah, we all get our tickets a year early. But if you're expecting me to be the entertainment coordinator, then I've...”

“Okay, okay, look, I’ve got another call. Sorry, Quincy, I’ve got to...”

“Sure.” He tapped the phone against his forehead.

The woman in the seat beside him raised an eyebrow. “Everything all right?”

“Oh, yeah, thanks.” He smiled, made a vague, empty gesture with his hands.

“Can I ask what you do?” She was well-dressed but overly made up, and dog-eared pages of *The Economist* she was reading. She’d told Quincy earlier that she was born in Ethiopia, had grown up in France, and so a lot of their travel-talk was spent on the subject of America’s view of transport security. Quincy wasn’t sure how to answer her question. His “employment” was a part-time gig at a used goods store in Harvard Square, but his call was regarding the informal leadership of The White Table, and how did you explain that?

Quincy’s parents adopted him by mail. A couple of aging white professors shipping over a half-Asian child – it might as well have been in

a crate – based on an out-of-date photo the size of a business card. He didn’t remember much of anything from those years, he’d been too young, so most of his early memories consisted of being very confused. Kids with features like his aren’t that unusual in Cambridge, but most of them had at least one parent that shared them. When he grew older, that part got a bit easier, but he was now a part of a family of academics, and you learned to approach these issues with an eye for study. His classmates used to tell Quincy he was an experiment; sometimes he himself wondered if his parents wished they’d kept his receipt.

So when he gave himself the makeover, there was a part of him that knew – that was self-aware enough – to see it as overcompensation. That he’d become boistrous and avuncular to hide his natural introversion, and that the whole thing was thin and haphazard. It probably was less healthy to be so cognizant of it than it was to do it in the first place. But when he was online with the his fellow fans, that felt less like faking it, so if they wanted him to be the leader, that was fine. It was largely decorative, anyway. Kids in a clubhouse. Except for times like this, when there was a meet-up and everyone had to act like their

online personas matched their real life ones for a weekend.

After his only graphic novel, Patch Brennan was next seen as a contributing writer for a short-lived cable drama series. His only credited episode featured two writers visiting the college campus where the show was set. One was a comic book writer, one was a well-regarded traditional prose writer. The prose writer is there to research a novel set on campus, the comic writer is there to do a signing in the bookstore. Amid the various subplots involving the regular characters, the prose writer is put in his place regarding what student life is really like in the modern day, and the comic writer schools a fan – teaching the student that his defensive posture has nothing to do with being oppressed for his interests and everything to do with his own attitude. The final scene is the two writers sitting down next to each other in the campustown bar, unaware that they’re both in the same field, that they both have affected the lives of the students that the show revolved around.

Quincy thought of that episode often when he was writing posts on the message board. About the false selves that everyone presents

to the world, one for each situation. He had to recommend it to Kendra sometime. She was the big Persona fan.

Maybe... maybe if he just pushed himself upwards a bit, and curled his legs onto the fold-out, he could get in a position comfortable enough to sleep? But he'd be in the fetal position, and he'd either be looking right at the woman's face, or would have his ass jutting into her space. Neither seemed worth the embarrassment.

Which left him instead with one final resort; Quincy knew how he could pass the time remaining until the train reached Fusco, but he didn't like what it said about him. His thumb slid across the Monsterphone almost unbidden; by the time his eyes lowered, the game was booting up. The game that was probably destroying his life.

In the *Legendary Ballad* series, there were more spin-offs than there were main titles, but part of what made the series special was that all of the side projects fit seamlessly into the canon. On his phone, Quincy had one of these, a mobile-

exclusive side project with the subtitle *The Fall of the Kingdom*.

The game was set directly following the original game trilogy that inspired the series. The protagonist, Lord Anthony, the Champion of Alva's Pass, had been one of the party members in the last of those three games – though in that case, the early game's character limit had left him with the decidedly less-majestic "Tony." The canon ending of the game left Anthony as the restored ruler of the kingdom in which the games had taken place. In this new game, released only a couple of years ago, the player shepherded Lord Anthony as he attempted to maintain peace over his lands – a losing battle, actually; setting up what became the fourth game in the saga, the first which was pre-planned to make use of the game world's growing history in service of an epic saga.

Frank Sturm, the figurehead leader of BE Entertainment, had jokingly referred to it as an "Ozymandias Sim" in the PR materials. But on Quincy's forum, the game had unfortunately picked up another name due to their resident troll, during one of his more lucid phases (or with one of his more lucid faces):

"Card-based battles, resource management, a passive protagonist, and complete failure as the only end-result. They might as well have called it *The Rape of the Kingdom*, it's not like it would've made the thing any less marketable."

It wasn't long before someone called it that in a Freudian slip, and then someone else, and pretty soon half of the board was doing it "ironically." Quincy hadn't yet, to his knowledge, but he rarely talked about the game on the board; the game had become, rather bizarrely, a personal matter for him. He thumbed down the sound on his phone at the game's title screen and loaded his save file. He glanced over at his riding partner, who had fallen asleep with the number six bestseller in her lap.

The game operated on a fictional calendar, and each tick forward carried with it between one and ten tasks to be performed. Oftentimes, the order of the tasks influenced their results as much as the king's experience level. There were diplomacy tasks, maintenance tasks, and combat tasks. "Maintenance" basically swallowed

up everything about ruling the interior of the kingdom, and the other two involved dealing with what lay outside the kingdom's borders. When a day was complete, the reward was a "cutscene" delivered in a visual novel style, advancing Lord Anthony to his expected end – though to be fair, there was plenty of intrigue, dramatic twists, and cameos from other characters in the series to make it less of a dirge.

All actions in the game were handled in one of three ways. One was making choices in dialogue trees, one was shunting quantities of materials between different regions or into the provenance of different aides, and one was issuing combat decisions. As a lethargic king, Anthony didn't lead his troops at the forefront; the game didn't play as an RTS during battle. Instead, the system used your current resource setup to provide you with a deck of cards, which it dealt out into hands of different squads and techniques that you played in something equivalent to a stripped-down CCG. Your plays were weighed against the plays of not only the opposing leaders, but also your own appointed generals, who could choose to ignore you if your numbers weren't high enough (at a petulant loss to your favorability rating). Each of the three

gaming systems influenced the other, and the way they interlocked is what made it interesting.

Because Lord Anthony was destined to fail – he couldn't escape his canon ending forever – there was no "game over" state. What changed, the reason to play it out as long as possible, was how Anthony would be remembered – as an incompetent ruler justly overthrown, or a valiant king who held his people together as long as possible against the forces of an entire world. This also paid off in various narrative ways: seeing more cutscenes that set up the rest of the game series and so on. Though to add insult to injury, the length of your rule was tallied on an online leaderboard. Quincy had been playing the game consistently since its release, and he'd cracked the top one hundred players. The leaderboard, though, only displayed the top fifty publicly. His fellow members of The White Table had no idea that he'd kept Lord Anthony alive until his sixtieth year.

The first two times that Quincy felt the effects of depression, he wasn't actually depressed. That in and of itself sounds trite and overclever, but *everyone* needs their stupid and non sequiter coping devices.

Instance Number One was pretty early; his parents had sent him off to a summer camp, this little collection of cabins up in the Maine woods where kids got offloaded to get babysat by undergrads for six weeks in the name of character-building. Quincy was an indoors kid (like you'd say about a damned cat), so he was pretty miserable for most of it. He had a crush on one of the counselors, too; that should've made it a fun story, but it didn't. He was swimming further out in the lake by the camp when he got tired, or distracted, and he sank underwater. Someone eventually grabbed him, towed him back and he was fine. Didn't even need CPR. But in the moment, he *knew* he was drowning, he could feel the icy water numbing each limb in turn and he could see the sunlight against the water slowly receding as he sank lower. Maybe it was only seconds, but in the moment he was down there for a dwindling lifetime, dark and weightless. And in all of the dramatic misery that a petulant child can conjure – unnoticed by a beautiful girl

twice his age in a tie-dyed shirt and the recent recipient of his bunkmate sitting on his head when he was trying to sleep – he wondered if it was worth trying to fight it.

Instance Number Two was in high school, during phase two of his self-reinvention. He'd talked to William about this before, and for him it had gone in phases, too. Building a better Quincy, from the outside inward. But he was still awkward, then; dressing better, yeah, and the first of his coterie of AV Geek friends to get a *real* girlfriend, as in something that had lasted over two months, but the old awkward Quincy was barely even spackled over. And he and that girl, who was blonde and funny and a great kisser and had her own car but was never that interested in hearing about things he cared for more than her, they were always fighting. And one night, that fighting turned *real* ugly.

Quincy said something that he shouldn't to the girl, and he upset her greatly. In his apology, he fell to his knees and sobbed. It was quite a presentation; her friends were there, and some of his weren't far away. It was outside the building during a school dance, prompted by some school-level bullshit that he didn't even remember now. Thing was, though, to this day Quincy wasn't sure

how much of that he'd meant. He'd pressed the back of her hand against his wet face and he'd said a thousand sorries, but how much was to keep her? How much of the pathetic display was a passive-aggressive jab – because she'd so obviously *pushed* him into this childish tantrum?

There was something about working oneself into that Method actor's groveling, looking at her uncomfortable face and being unable to stop crying, and also wondering how much he meant it, that felt so inescapably empty. A yawning singularity in his gut, like when you'd forgotten to eat and you lay down to sleep hours too late, and there's that heavy sour pit that feels like it will pull you through the bed and into the floor.

When the real thing came later, Quincy recognized it like an old friend.

Quincy planted his elbows on the fold-out tray and clicked through the next day in the life of Lord Anthony, Champion of Alva's Pass. He was playing the game darker this time through; the king was in the midst of summit talks, while his troops were stealthily invading a series of

border forts. If Quincy literally played his cards right, the kingdom would expand its borders overnight while the leaders of the neighboring nations were occupied.

His mind, though, was only half-focused on his task. He needed to check reservations at a number of places when he made it into town, and he was sliding little figurative index cards to determine the proper order. In the order that they'd be attending? But the karaoke bar was farther away from his hotel than anything else. Would doubling back be a bigger hassle, or would it be less tiring to hoof it around the con center area after he'd done the longer trips? Ugh, best to just do the bar first, so he could pass on the music that he'd collected.

He drew a bad hand in the game, and sighed. Anthony wasn't going to make it another six months.

Patch Brennan suffered from depression for most of his life, apparently. That he died young, though, was unrelated. It was just one of those stupid things. He was rollerblading with his girlfriend (apparently rollerblading was still a thing that people did) and he was hit by a swiftly-moving van at an intersection. The helmet didn't do enough. In a day and age when the suicide of

an author still had this stupidly-romantic veneer that it shouldn't, Brennan's end via accident after a lifetime of battling that cold parasite had the sort of pathetic literary irony that would've fit right into his first book.

When Quincy first read it, he hadn't been old enough to pick up on the cleverness of his favorite comic. That all of the metatextual layers represented an attempt at the protagonist's self-mythologizing, a coping device, a way of filling his fundamental emptiness. Some critics read it as a pointed satire of postmodernism, but it wasn't, really; it was a filtered autobiography, a literalization of the author's attempt to dig at his own fuckedupedness with the appropriate surgical distance.

When his fellow passenger woke up from her nap, they were at the Ohio-Indiana border and Quincy had lost Lord Anthony not once, but twice. He wasn't just getting bad hands, he was clearly too distracted to keep the poor man's kingdom intact.

"Is that a game?" The woman asked, in that don't-really-care tone that meant she was just embarrassed from sleeping next to him.

"Sorta." He winced. "No, yes, it is. I say 'sorta' because it's making me angry."

"You sound like my nephew." She pulled her hair back, seemed to futz around looking for something to tie it, and then just gave up and let it fall back. "He gets so angry at his Xbox."

"Oh yeah?" As if this conversation path wasn't wholly predictable.

"I ask him, if it makes him so angry, why not shut it off? What's fun about getting so angry over it?"

"Does he answer you?" Quincy didn't look up from his phone. "Or does he just roll his eyes at you?" She stiffened. "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I... haven't been getting a lot of sleep. I meant that literally; or honestly, rather."

She gave him an appraising look. "Mostly, he just doesn't even acknowledge it." He nodded. "But there's really no talking to him at his age, anyway." She finally just sighed. "How far are we, now?"

"I'm not sure. I forget how wide Indiana is." Quincy had reloaded his game from the

beginning and was now paging forward time without taking any action at all, with one thumb, as he spoke. How long would Lord Anthony survive without his help? "You're staying on past Fusco, though, right? Chicago?" She nodded. "Then I'm really not sure, I've no idea how far that is." He had no idea where he'd put his train schedule, either. Kim would know... not that Quincy was going to drop him a line.

"Oh, it doesn't matter." She arched her back. "What I like about riding the train is that you lose sense of time after a while. That doesn't happen on planes. Too aware, I think, of the *unreality* of being in the air. On a train, nothing ever happens. It's kind of wonderful."

Quincy glanced down at Lord Anthony, sitting in his throne and clutching his chin with one fist, growing older as time slid on by and his kingdom shrank pixel by pixel, unmoving. Just a statue to be toppled over at time's end.

He didn't know *why* he'd started getting depressed. That's not how it works, after all, not really. It's true that some contributing elements

are easier to identify, but there wasn't some single event that flipped a switch in his brain. He wasn't even really a hundred percent clear when it started at all. He just started feeling tired more often, and his nights more and more often consisted solely of lying on his couch in his boxers, guiding Lord Anthony to his death again and again.

His laptop was usually on the floor next to that couch, open to the forum so that in between marathon sessions he could lean over, type in some pithy comments. They hadn't noticed much difference in him, but he was largely playing around them as it was. But he'd remained relatively high-functioning thus far, anyway. He made it into work on time, smiled at the right people, and when he had obligations that he couldn't wriggle out of, he was able to put his game face on. Given where he worked, and who he hung out with, it largely just came across, Quincy thought, like he was acting disaffected; which if anything probably raised his capital.

The days blurred into each other, a chain of discrete phases with no real breaks. There was the Work phase, where an invisible self rode on

his shoulders, cupped their hands over his ears. There was the Game phase, where he stared at the tiny screen on his phone, trying to block out the whispers from around his apartment, little mocking asides from the garbage and the dishes and the other minute tasks that always seemed like so much extra work (the things with which he desperately caught up during the air bubbles that would sometimes escape to the surface). And there was the Sleep phase, which was named sardonically, because many of the nights he'd roll around on top of his covers, naked and sweating, too tired to get up but unable to actually fall asleep.

It all did come and go in waves. It wasn't every *single* day. He'd have gone mad by now, or done something drastic. There were times when he'd think that he was "all better," where he was a riot at parties and he seemed to have his shit locked down. It wasn't "mania," either, it was just a sort of false normalcy. But every time he was back in those times, he was given pause; would wonder if maybe he wasn't really depressed at all, just lazy or dramatic. Or even if not, if it might not just be all over now.

Surely this time, Lord Anthony would make it all the way through.

In *The Things You Leave Behind*, the story-within-the story is an elaborate epic of alternate universes. As it continually parallels the outer tale of the author avatar, reality becomes indeterminate. The various layers become equal; there is even a group of heroic warriors who commandeer a great spherical timeship and pass between them. Quincy's favorite subplot involved the author avatar's best friend, a neo-hippie girl (Quincy's first fictional crush, probably, and draw a straight Freudian line right to that camp counselor) who worked with a down and out investigator for the church, looking into the origins of a strange magical ritual – one that created a sigil that recurred throughout the story, binding it all together.

Cliche though it may be, sometimes he had dreams where he was an advisor to Lord Anthony, standing beside the throne. He couldn't save him in the dreams, either.

"Isn't your phone ringing?"

He blinked at her. “Hm? Oh.” He looked down at the display. Laura. He took the call.

“Hello?”

“Hey.” Her deep, breathy voice sounded like she’d just been laughing. It always sounded that way. “Are you in the city yet?”

“Not yet. Soon.” Quincy rubbed at his face. “What time is it? I don’t even know.”

“Neither do I, actually.” There was something muffled on the other end, and her voice got further away for a moment as something poured. “I haven’t seen the outside in a while. *Don’t* ask.”

It didn’t sound like it was for a bad reason. He winced. “How’s Joann?”

“She says hi. So, hey, William said that I should give you a buzz. He seemed to think you needed something.”

“Did he?” Quincy made apologetic motions and the woman beside him slid out of the way, freeing him to clamber into the aisle. “That’s not like him.”

“What, being considerate?”

“No, not that... It’s not like him to...” This road led to trouble. “It doesn’t matter. When do you get in?”

“I’m picking up Kendra in the morning, we’ll touch down late afternoon some time. You’re going to *love* our costumes.”

“I bet I will.” Actually, he knew what they would be already. Kendra had PM’d him the week before to double-check some canon details. Honestly, Quincy wasn’t sure they’d be distinctive enough to win. But he did figure that they’d look great in them. “Looks like you’ll miss lunch. William and Ivan will both be in early enough, we’re going to go to that one place.”

“It’s for the best. Let you boys get some bonding in, you’ll probably talk about us the whole time.”

“Naturally,” He chuckled, pulling the sliding door of the train car bathroom and slipping inside.

“So, anyway...” He could hear her sniffing. “What did you need? Did a payment not clear or something?”

“Oh, no, uh...” He looked at himself in the mirror, then tried again without his glasses. “I’m not sure what he meant.” He needed to shave. He couldn’t grow a proper beard, it came in weird patches. “Although, actually...”

Did Brennan actually ride this train, all that time ago, before he wrote his book? Was that the layer that was true? Did he go crazy when he saw how the artist drew the smoking lounge, because he knew its true shape? Or was that another bit that he was hiding behind? In the end, he supposed that it didn’t really matter. In the book, the protagonist had gone back to his seat, and awkwardly bonded with his fellow passenger. All of the characters had names in Patch’s book, even the unimportant ones. Even after talking with her, Quincy couldn’t remember the name of the woman he’d sat next to for all of these hours.

All things considered, the parallelism was maybe a little forced after all.

“Hey, Laura?” He leaned against the bathroom wall, sliding the latch back and forth between *occupied* and *vacant*. “Have you played *Fall of the Kingdom* recently?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever played that one.” Laura was considering. “Wait, is that the one on the phone? No, I haven’t. You know me. I’m the casual fan.” Quincy didn’t bother to explain that “casual gamer” usually meant something else, and would suggest that she *had* played it. “Why?”

"Oh, it's stupid. I've been banging my head against it for a while, that's all."

"Kendra's the one who can't put her phone down. Have you talked to her?"

"Oh, it's not that important. Don't worry about it."

"Quincy?" Laura's voice bobbed – she was walking somewhere, now. "No joke, are you okay?"

There was a start, and then a stop, and then a start again – backwards.

"This is the one bit that I don't like." The woman was dangling one high heel off of her toes as Quincy pulled his bag over his shoulder. "When you're in sight of your destination, even in the city itself, but everything slows down, like it takes as long here as the rest of the trip, what's it called..."

"Zeno's Arrow."

"Right, right." She hadn't really needed an answer. It was too late, too weird, to pretend that he'd only just forgotten her name. "It almost turns the trip sour."

"Well, these things are rarely about the endings." Quincy leaned over. "I sort of like it. It feels like you're squeezing that bubble of time you were talking about, ever so gently, before it pops – it gets all distorted."

"I hadn't thought of it that way." The woman looked up at him, and then tilted her head oddly.

Unsure, he continued. "I think endings are always distorted anyway, because things don't ever really resolve the way they do in stories."

"You know..."

"Hm?"

"Oh, nothing, never mind." She pulled her hair back, scratched behind her ear. "It was a stupid idea."

"Yeah, I..." Quincy hunched over a bit, rested his ass on the stainless steel sink. "Yeah, I don't know... I guess I've been a bit down lately, that's all."

"Oh yeah?" Laura *hurmed*. "That sucks. Did something happen?"

"Not really." Quincy kicked at the toilet. "Just one of those things, y'know."

"Sure." There was a long pause. "Is this one of those things where I remind you that we're all going to be there, and we'll have a good time, and that'll make you feel better – or, failing that, we'll take your mind off of it? Or is this one of those things where being around a bunch of crazy fan-type-people is going to make it worse?"

"..."

"Because, I don't want to tell you that we'll be fine if you bow out, but I don't want you to stress under the, under the, I guess *obligation* of it all."

"I'm not sure what to say to that, Laura." Quincy frowned. "Considering for all I know, I'll wake up tomorrow, be totally fine, and then feel like an asshole for bringing it up."

There was a peal of laughter on the other end of the phone. "Oh, fuck you."

"Eh?"

"Look, if you're fine tomorrow, that's great. And if you're not, that'll be shit, but we'll work it out. But why would you be an asshole for bringing it up now? You're not fine *now*, are you? Give us all some credit."

“Fair enough.” He was smiling, just a little. He *didn’t* feel better; his hands still weakly played with the seams of his denim. But saying it out loud always helped release it a little bit, bought him a little bit of breathing room.

“Don’t know why you’re talking to *me*, anyway. Kendra’s the one who’s good at this. I’m just going to tell you to get laid.”

He slid the door back open.

“Are you offering?”

“You *wish*, Quincy Adams.”

As the train let out, Quincy slipped between a family of six and a pair of frat-type guys, swinging his luggage ahead of him like a sword parting waves. His earbuds were in, and his phone was switched to a different app: one which was pumping tracks from idol Hashimoto Hanae through the buds at full volume. He jerked to one side to avoid a cart conveying two old ladies towards the train and found himself at the head of the line.

At the exit, Fusco sprawled out in all directions. Quincy had a day of business ahead of him – he had to get started. A cab driver was waving him over. Quincy shouted the name of his hotel over the music that the driver could barely hear and got a nod.

In the cab, he rolled down his window as much as he was able, let the air rush in. It had that acrid gagging texture of bus exhaust, but that was okay. He was getting tired of being in confined spaces. Buried under the layers of his own bullshit.

He glanced at his phone. For a split second, he considered deleting the game. Cold turkey, cut off one of his excuses like a gangrenous limb. But that wasn’t fair. He *liked* the game. Lord Anthony was never the problem. Besides, in his story, the struggle was worth the effort, because the struggle was the whole point.

The book, Patch Brennan’s book, didn’t have an especially memorable ending, compared to the rest of it. A convertible ride in the desert, a “youth okay and free again” sort of thing, like riding into the sunset. It was cliché on purpose,

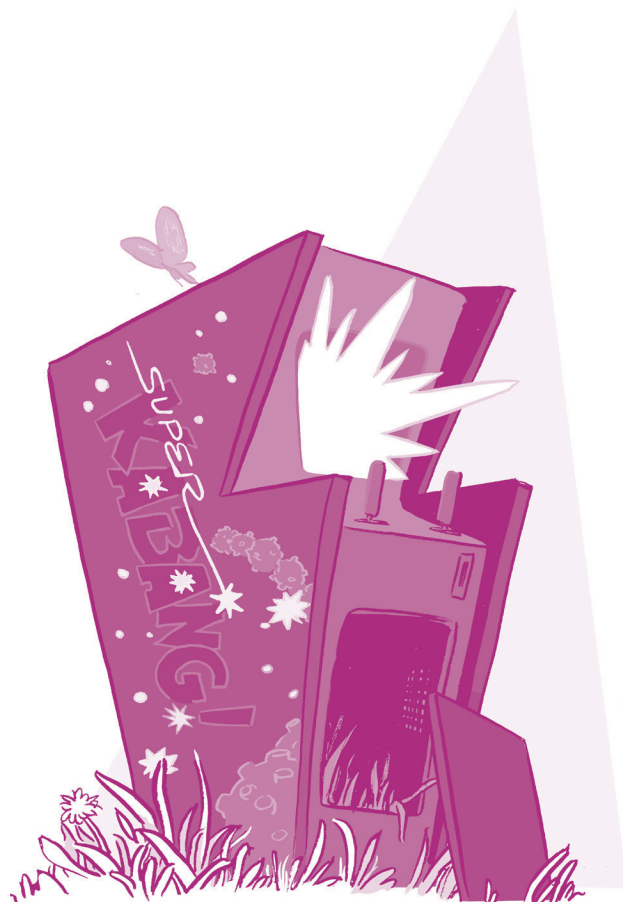
a grace granted to the characters who deserved it by an author who hadn’t found it for himself. For the author, who never got his second chance, the message was meant to be clear: to take the moments of brief reprieve for what they were and savor them, because the future forever lay in doubt.

Well, thought Quincy Adams, slipping his phone into his pocket, I feel shitty but at least I’m not alone. Let’s see what Fusco has to show us.

The Tesseract

In Fusco, Indiana, not many blocks at all from the convention center, there's a popular joint for kids and kids-at-heart called Dante's Pizza and Games. In the late seventies and early eighties, when Disco was still top of the pops, it was one of the biggest roller rinks in the country – now, it's one of the only remaining, the place where the local “Pannych and Phyr” rollergirl team comes to defend their title. There's one now, in fact, still in her elbow pads and shrugging up her mesh top as she fires a light gun at a cadre of approaching zombies. To her left and just above, a married couple on second honeymoon are laughing as the husband spills out in a motorcycle game, and reminiscing about their third date some twenty years ago, when she beat the Centipede high score on the machine at their local drive-in, long since closed.

When the mirror ball bubble burst, the place went empty for a while, was the illegal host for a half-dozen really good illegal raves and a far greater number of really terrible ones. As the story goes, the new fire-and-brimstone interior design preceded the new management; was, in fact, the product of a homeless graffiti artist who (as it's always told) never took off his antique aviator goggles. In any case, when the proprietor (who was probably not actually named Dante)



ripped up the benches, rebuilt the tiered floor, and started putting in nickel games, the concentric rings of the arena space served to carefully segregate the various aspects of arcade culture that rediscovered the place in the Era of Ironic Nostalgia.

Kids are chasing each other at lightspeed across the top floor, where the boardwalk games sing in a grinding chorus of coughed-up tickets and the occasional jackpot jangle. Barely separated is the rhythm section, where Korean exchange students dance-fight with Hot Topic Goths and one fleet-footed off-duty bike messenger atop a dais of glowing arrows. Below that are the driving games, both solo rides and multiplayer races where a set of chairs are linked in a row in front of identical screens and too-small steering wheels. From there it's only a step down to the war zone, where serious-minded hunters stand shoulder-shoulder with frat boys bracing blue and orange pistols atop forearms. It isn't until two-thirds of the way down and towards the center before you see joysticks, those iconic implements of Generation Whatever, and smell that woven mix of flop sweat and reminiscence. First the fighting games, where dead-eyed pros

blur their fingers across the six button spread, annihilating all challengers without joy; and then the brawlers, those thinly-plotted quarter-sucking gauntlets of red-flashing gangbangers. By now, the casual crowd has all but evaporated, and every face is either a rictus of concentration or a detached and lopsided grin. These people don't just know the games, they know that whole world.

It's in the ninth circle of this Hipster Hell that we find The Mountain. He sits on a stool that he dragged down from the fighting level, digging his nails into hair the color and texture of old duct tape. He is there and he is playing a game called "*Super-Kabang!*" because the bottom of the pit, up against the streaked plastic walls of the rink, is where they've stashed the antiques.

The Mountain is killing time, some might say sadistically, though he himself might say the inverse. He knuckles another couple of coins into the machine – one to pay, a second to push the first into the dented coin box. He's in town a day earlier than he has to be, for the signings and all the rest, and trying not to think about it.

The Midwest Fan Fair is noted for being a controlled environment – more receptive to artists, fewer large-dollar hands on the steering

wheel. But if it were so, why would he even be there? It would just be San Diego again, a couple of football fields worth of lightshows and one far corner looking like the poorest part of Calcutta with all the outstretched hands. Like a Neal Stephenson passion play – addled refugees buzzing with the new-old language, lashing their desperate rafts to the aircraft carrier that was Hollywood.

"*Super-Kabang!*" operates with a single joystick and no buttons. You play an astronaut with a magnet (represented by a sixteen-pixel stickman) who is reeling in mines that drift through space. The stick controls the astronaut's rotation in place just left of center. His magnet can catch and grab one mine, and then a second mine can attach to the first, and so on in a chain, but the chain can only add mines at its end – a mine that hits the middle of the chain causes a reaction that blows up the astronaut (the screen blinks white and then displays the score). The chain's swing is very fancy programming for its time, but the collision detection is stolen from earlier games. The Mountain knows this not because he is particularly interested in the details, but because the game's designer never shut up

about the original *Kabang!* when they would play games together; back when The Mountain would have fit a far sight better on this rickety stool.

What separates “*Super-Kabang!*” from its predecessor is that it is two-player, one of the earliest two-player joystick games ever, in fact – the earliest cabinets even borrowed frame designs from Pong. And so when the teenager slaps a coin into the machine without giving The Mountain so much as a flick of the eyes, he can only purse his lips as his score is erased and the game starts from scratch, with a second astronaut at the mirror position right of center. In the days when arcades drew the fad-hungry nation in droves, to “kabang” someone was to start a two-player game just to fuck with their score and walk away. The teenager, for his part, begins turning his astronaut, and a henchman slides a stool under the invader’s chunky ass before stepping back to watch.

A “*Super-Kabang!*” deathmatch, even between two expert obsessives, is generally over in less than two minutes. The idea of two-player competition was judged to be enough – adapting the game to the premise would have delayed shipping, and the machines were all designed to be quarter-drains

before anything else. Each player rotates their astronaut’s chain of mines back and forth, trying to lengthen their own chain, and thus increase their score, while steering clear of the increasing chain of their opponent. Simple physics, and the screen size of the playing field, means that it’s impossible to stay alive for long. While the original *Kabang!* had its proponents during the arcade golden years, its sequel was DOA. None of the game’s original creators had anything to do with its “super” variant, but the association couldn’t help but damage their portfolios.

The Mountain, for his part, is no expert. Truth be told, he didn’t even like the game much; he’d wanted only a few moments to commune with the old days, when he wasn’t so tired all the time. Before his career slowed, before a lot of things. And so when his unrequested opponent grows his chain just long enough to take the high score before killing them both, he pulls up the palm of his right hand, cracking the knuckles, and decides to let the boy have it.

The boy, for his part, doesn’t smile, doesn’t take his eyes off the screen as he loads in more quarters. Bulbous, fingers oozing out of a brown hoodie – he looked like a turd. The boy’s

henchman just crossed his arms. It was all the boy knew, that much was clear to The Mountain. He was Emperor Turd of Dante’s Pizza & Games, and the kabang that he’d given The Mountain amounted to marking territory in the joystick ghetto that was the building’s lower levels. *Your kind is not wanted here.*

The Mountain rises. He seems to reel back like an avalanche, sliding one thick tree trunk of a leg around to balance, and then soaring upwards. With his size, the lines on face are thick-cut freeways. He was built out of a city; should carry a Latinate title, like those toys his godson played with. Fortress Maximus, or Omega Supreme. Even in the shadow of the colossus, though, the Turd doesn’t turn, doesn’t bother with eye contact. The Turd’s lackey looks sleepy. At his size and age, The Mountain’s movements should sound like stone on stone, but there is only the raspberry-noise of his pleather stool.

He wipes his mouth, once, and heads up the stairs; in the screen of an out-of-order terrorist shooter, The Mountain sees himself. His broad shoulders look to him more like styrofoam inserts, and his oft-busted nose hooks far to one side, makes him look mean. Dale Messner,

former masked avenger, straightens out his back, turns towards the exit, when his cell rings, competing with the sirens and gunshots of the arcade soundtrack. The voice on the other end is of his arch-nemesis: not the man who defined his greatest moments in the ring, not under any of the names he'd used, but instead someone closer to home, for no man can hate another more than he can his best friend.

This is not that story, though, not *his* story. This is a story about the machine.

At this time, in the year of the final *Legendary Ballad* game, the year that one aging wrestler has come to the Midwest Fan Fair, there are only eleven surviving cabinets containing the “*Super-Kabang!*” arcade game that come from its initial run. There are a very few DIY imitation units built and owned by obsessives, but it was never a very popular game, and its existence is largely limited to a Wikipedia sub-entry and an old emulator ROM that usually came bundled with other, more hotly-desired games.

Of those eleven, six of them share a similar fate to the one in Fusco: consigned to the lowest-traffic areas in arcades already long past their prime. One in the “free play” zone of a family-party outlet in a Montana strip mall; one in the dank concrete cube half below ground in a South Carolina tourist trap, a supposed “amusement park” whose defunct attractions were secondary to its fireworks retailer. In Los Angeles, the pizza parlor which held another had not even bothered to put up a sign when the second-player joystick gave out, though that literally took the “Super” out of *Kabang!* entirely.

This leaving four arcade cabinets remaining of this sad, obscure little title that was almost, yet not quite historical.

Step back just a week and a day, and one of those four is casting light that frames the face of Richard Prescott, as he wrenches the joystick violently back and forth. He is standing in the immaculate breakroom of B-E Entertainment's North American development house; really just a few floors of a Vancouver office building, immaculate because nobody ever seems to get a break, because it's always crunch. The bumper

pool tables and arcade cabinets made for a great quality-of-working-life spread in some trade mag, but most of the guys never seemed to have time to get up and out of their cubicle quads. Richard is at work early: his apartment's being fumigated and he wasn't sure where else to go.

Richard's astronaut spins back and forth in place, until he finally just walks away, leaving the mines to collect haphazardly and unsupervised. Maybe he should just boot his terminal up early, he thinks, and see if he can clear out some of last night's bug report. Fumigation at home and at work, leaving Richard adrift in space.

Back another six months, then, as another of the four awaits its moment. Three shampoo bottles stand in a perfect line on the toilet tank, in contrasting pastels. Clarifying, volumizing, and conditioner. Carefully arranged, the only sign of color left in the surgical white of the eviscerated bathroom. Roland Costas could draw an invisible line across the edges of the fin-top tubes. “Why do you suppose they did this?”

Michael Fitzgerald tries to lean around him, angling with his Obaque Monsterphone. "C'mon, man, you're blocking my shot." Roland's roommate, a guy who'd been so insistent that they have in-unit laundry that Roland was now in some office, transferring orders to other departments for verification, instead of calling out sick from retail once a week.

"No, wait, hold up." Roland waves Fitz back. "They took everything out of here, but left three full bottles of shampoo, perfectly, like, *geometrically* arranged on the toilet?"

"That's not all." Samantha Bingham, pulling her hair back with a faded office elastic, standing in the shower. "They left a pretty damned nice shower head." Tapping it with her sweater-clad elbow, sending the massage handle into a soft pendulum arc.

"The showerhead makes sense. You can't just swipe all the fixtures and leave empty piping." Roland shakes his head. "But I for one find this weird."

"Maybe they're a present – move, dammit – left for the next tenants." Fitz finally shoulders past, gets his angles lined up. Three sharp beeps, the modern shutter click.

"I can tell you this one." Maddox, the new kid, leaning against the doorway. His hands are smudged with cut drywall, and his cap is sweat through. "Here." He tosses a ball to Sam, a foam Chicago Air ball three fingers wide that conforms to the grip. Stress ball. "I found that lost in a corner in the kitchen – which smells heavy of millet, by the way, if you keep track of that shit."

Fitz turns from the toilet. "Does millet really have a smell?"

"Clearly, her kids, or some kids she knew, were doing some of the moving. One of the last things out was the shampoo, and they forgot."

Sam tosses the ball back to him, wipes her hands on her jeans. "No, no. Because if she left them for a last shower, and even if she'd used shampoo for soap this last time to save the mess and one more thing to pack, she would've also left cleaning products here. This shower, and the sink, are spic-and-spanned reecal good."

Any response Maddox might have made is cut off as a car alarm went off outside. Their signal. They're into the empty living room before it's woop-wooped into submission, and Maddox is helping Fitz through even as Sam gives the hardwood floors behind them a wipe-down.

Roland has the screen shut behind them by the time the first of them is down the back stairs, and he's piling into the running car by the time the apartment's front door swings open to admit the realtor. Chris Igou, waiting behind the wheel, hits the gas and pulls them into a maze of side streets and rolling dumpsters.

The apartment's evacuees had left the bars off of one window to pass items through and never replaced them. It was the easiest entry they'd had yet.

"You know..." Maddox cranks his window down and fishes the remaining Blue out of his now spiral-curved softpack. "We should really be riding around in a kickin' van for this."

The very first time, it had been the apartment across from them. A few days abandoned, the door had been left open. Initially, they were just curious how differently the other space had been laid out. It was Fitz and Chris and Sam, trying to step softly to kill the echo that made the tiny one-bedroom appear cavernous.

They told Roland later, over drinks and blackened chicken on the porch; an evening before the summer heat had come in full. "It's amazing what people will leave behind

when they go," Chris mumbled over his arms, straddling a chair, looking out at the stars and the dual prongs of the still-call-it-Sears Tower spiking out from behind tree cover and distance. "The stuff that they don't bring, but the stuff they don't throw out."

The dinner had in fact been cooked on a grill that had been left at their own building by previous tenants. It had been full of burnt paper, someone's rush to erase.

Fitz was grinning, playing with his then-new phone. They'd expected the gimmick of that camera to wear off with Fitz quickly. "People are always leaving these empty places unlocked. We could just walk in and take pictures of this stuff."

"Why?" Roland sipped at a hard cider, grunted and winced but sipped again.

"To capture these things." Fitz drew his fingers through a gnarl of mountain man beard. "To get a look at these people who are gone, before all the traces are washed away."

Chris: "Pop archaeology."

Roland: "Breaking and entering."

It was a dilettante's hobby, a we're-still-young-and-have-escape-hatches hobby. It made for a good Tumblr, sometimes. They didn't do it often

enough to consider it a thing that they actually did. Maddox wanted them to call themselves The Ambulance Chasers, which was sort of clever and sort of didn't make sense, in that way young people have when they're making up terms for stuff.

Now Roland is saying "It's a legal gray area, in a way," as though he'd never been on the other side of the argument. "The owners are gone, the places are empty, we don't take anything, and we don't stay."

"We're still trespassing." Sam, checking her eyes in the flip-down. "I'm not saying it bothers me, I'm just saying that you shouldn't have any illusions about it." She'd been wearing more make-up lately. Roland sighs, slumps back, plays with the slack in his seat belt. He sees Chris glance at him in the rear view; Chris is still wearing the ketchup-and-mustard stripes of his drive-thru job.

"You look like a Quidditch player."

"I don't even know what that is."

Maddox is zoned out now, head against the window. Their circle had always been a closed one, and nobody was even sure where the kid had come from. "Had a weird dream last night," he murmurs.

Fitz is digging at his knuckles with a fingernail. "Nobody's ever going to want to hear it."

The next time, it's a two-floor house in a dirty neighborhood. Not a bad neighborhood, or dangerous, or filled with a different sort of person, just literally dirty. Sam rubs her shoulders, once, but they go in.

In what was once a living room, there's a hole in the wall. Roland sits back against the one opposite, following the pattern of the cheap linoleum with one finger. A series of raised and lowered crosses and squares, like bridges over an abyss. Some are scratched, tracks left by a child's old Hot Wheels. Sam walks over as the others truck upstairs. "Do we really need to talk about this?" One strand of hair isn't pulled as tight as the rest, and it stands in a high golden parabola to one side, straining to break free.

"Talk about what?" He sniffed. Heavy dust. They hadn't bothered cleaning when they left. "You're, you know, your own woman. What's it matter to me?" He eased on sore legs over to the hole.

"That's right, Roland, I am. Look, I'm sorry that I was... We know what that was. I got a little... a lot drunk, and..."

"Hey, there's some stuff stuck in here." He slides his hand inward between the studs, rifles around, brings each object to light. "Ugh, I think... I think when they were moving, they stuck their garbage into this hole."

"God." She takes a step forward, swings around in an arc that wouldn't get too close to him. "Why was there a hole in the first place?"

"I think they took something out of here. Like they had money buried in the wall or..." He pulls up some ancient paper wrappers, crusted in shapes like flowers. "This stuff's old. Everything's faded." He hands one to her; she delicately turns it over in her hands. All the logos are washed out glyphs. Recognition was gone. The artifacts had lost their meaning.

Fitz appears at the banister. "Hey, guys, you've gotta see this!" He leads them upstairs and into a bedroom, where a pair of narrow cabinet doors stand atop the closet. "Get this, get this!"

Chris swings the doors open, and the cabinet is full of ordered and shelved Gideon Bibles in pristine condition.

"Fitz? You really think you're going to make a book of these things?" Michael Fitzgerald is the one person that Roland still talks to from their old high school. They'd loved the same childhood cartoons, and still watch them now. That first week they'd met, Fitz had just returned from his grandmother's funeral. Lung cancer. Chris is watching Fitz take pictures; Roland is watching Sam, who watches the car, through a too-small window.

"I think it's art, man. A look at people, after they're gone."

"Yeah, but a blog is one thing, a book, a, what, a coffee table book, an art book, is serious work."

"She was a bruja, I swear to God. Or some other kind of witch. I dunno the differences in what the terms mean." They'd talk, in those days, their legs dangling over the packed school auditorium; tucked into the crawlspace afforded the lighting crew, armed with wet sandwiches and dog-eared issues of Nintendo Power. "She was cut from bamboo, you know? Thin, almost unbreakable. I remember, one time my mom

drops me off with Gamma so she can hit the dentist, and she's frying ice cubes. So I ask her, why, of course. I was a kid, then, little Pinocchio legs dangling over the chair."

Roland traded sandwiches with him, then, without asking. Waved him to go on.

"She'd etched these strange symbols, runes, I guess, onto each side of the ice cube. And these were real cubes, mind you, not those, you know, misshapen polygons you get in a modern suburban freezer tray. Then she'd deposit it gently onto the pan, where it would melt and exactly coat the pan's circular area. 'You've gotta give something up,' she said, 'for you to get what you wish.' That was all we did for the hour, and she wouldn't dare let me try the process. Looking back, I don't know how the heck a woman her age could have managed to cut the ice so perfectly, you know, precisely; and I never figured out where she got the idea. She could have been Wiccan, Gypsy, Freemason for all I knew, now all I can see is those blocks of ice vanishing, before you even have time to read their surfaces."

Maddox is peering in the fridge. "One brand new Grade A box of all-American baking soda, with included arm and hammer all in one. I think

they bought it for their new tenants. Awfully nice of them.” This one, a place where someone was actually expecting their deposit back. “What I find weird is the grill thing. I hear other people had grills outside when they moved into new places, too. Is that, like, a Chicago tradition that I haven’t heard of?”

“I hope not.” Roland keeps an eye on Maddox’s fingers, which twitch, sometimes even hold an invisible cigarette. They didn’t ever smoke inside when on a hunt, it left too many traces. “When I move out, I plan on taking that thing with me.”

Fitz snickers. “When do you suppose that will be? You buy a lottery ticket today, Costas?”

It’s the next time that they go out, that they find it.

It’s a three-bedroom walk-up, and the place is immaculate, like aliens came and transported the whole family away, with every particle of dust, every flicked-off hair or strewn disc from a three

hole punch. The only thing remaining in the apartment, standing up against a front window, is the height of implausible; a pristine, plugged-in arcade cabinet reading “Super”-Kabang! across its top-front panel.

Fitz gets his pictures, and Maddox makes a joke about The Last Starfighter, but nobody wants to linger so long as to play it, wants to make noise with it. Roland inserts a quarter anyway, and oh yeah, why the Hell is the electricity still turned on?

But he plays it, yes, and remembers being young and new.

It is now, and one of those lost cabinets has become a part of nature. It hosts plant life that has grown through its structure, sprouts leaves like hair. Somewhere behind the small board that contains the whole of the game itself, a hornet’s nest sits like a tumor. It sits in a shrine of rotten wood, but if we fall backwards through time, watching the decay move in reverse, the walls

seem to raise back up around it even as it hums back to life; and for a moment that image suggests that what you see is a barn, but it is in fact an old garage, tucked near to the treeline and the edge of a field, part of another property but distanced enough to seem its own bizarre, spontaneous unit. And this far back, it might well have been, as a small boy in black overalls emerges from the trees to find the strange building and the strange wildlife that then considered it almost home.

Thomas knows that he’s strayed off too far while playing, and that’s probably the only thing that he knows in this moment. Maybe some of the other kids had been taught more than he had, but Father had a “seen-and-not-heard” policy for his children that extended to maybe not saying much to them, either (although this, too, is an idea he’s only yet barely forming for himself). He only knows that this is strange and different, and so far not all that scary, so he approaches the strange barn to figure out the puzzle for himself. Thomas likes puzzles – his uncle fashioned him one out of two curved nails, that you could only separate in a particular way,

and reunite the same. It was clever, and Thomas wanted to be clever himself.

This, though, was something new, truly new, in that none of it seemed explainable based on anything he'd been taught. The wide-open doors framed a tableau where every bit of the sight was as strange as the whole of it. He took a step forward; he hadn't yet been seen.

The shelves along the back wall are spilling over with bottles and vats and tubs and boxes of strange things. At first it looks like cooking, and then after a moment maybe more like medicine. To one side are a series of strange machines that slowly resolve in his eye to shapes that are almost familiar, almost look like musical instruments. It's the center altar and the figures beneath it, though, that capture his attention.

The man is large, lumpy like an overpacked sausage, sitting squat against the altar, head hung low, like he's been hit. He mumbles like the spirit moves through him, but already Thomas has seen someone hurt in the head, and so he thinks maybe the man is sick. Is the medicine for him? The man is covered in dark hair, more hair than

he's ever seen on a human, and his clothes are all stained, and when Thomas had first caught a glimpse of the strange building, he'd thought the man a monster or devil.

To one side, opposite the instruments, is a woman who seems unconcerned with the man's sickness, might even be sick herself. She is so very thin, her hair is dirty, and much of her skin is red and peeling from too much sun. She is lying back in some sort of strange cushion, an alive sort of blob that moves with her, and she is moving... she is moving...

The contortion of her limbs brings a change in Thomas that he doesn't understand, and he creeps even closer to see. In the years to come, as he becomes old enough to understand much of what he'd seen; as he leaves the old world entirely for a strange new one, and on into adulthood... much of the image here fades, and a sort of tunnel vision collapses this memory into the undulations of the woman's wrist beneath the waistband of her pants.

In this moment, though, at this age, in his first world, he sees this and he casts his eyes back

to the glowing altar in the open room's center, and he hears his father call this a black mass.

The woman sees him, then, though her eyes never full open, never seem to fully register that Thomas is really there. Her head lolls.

"Wh'appened to you?"

And Thomas absurdly remembers the dark flesh that rings his eye, and shame blots out most of his fear. Though only most: his eyes again travel to the altar.

"Oh." She sort of shakes.

"Didjou wanna play?"

And Thomas flees back into the brush, back for home, feeling so very less than clever. Dismissing it all later as a nightmare, finding later still that it was a seed that erupted within his guts and poured out his mouth, like the vines would one day crawl from a stolen arcade machine.

Six months before the Emperor Turd came to The Mountain, it's now Roland's turn to watch the car. Drumming his hands on the steering wheel,

unwrapping its leather cover and rewrapping it. Cycling through the stations on the radio. Riffling through the glove box. Checking the clock.

Half an hour was a long time for a small house. Forty-five minutes was even longer.

He tries to scan the street, and then quietly gets out of the car, heads for the house. But then he hears the shouting and stops trying to be subtle. Inside, before a dead and plugged fireplace, everyone is arguing.

Fitz points at Maddox with a fist. "He took something from one of our hunts."

"Hey, fuck you!" He's purple-faced, held back with an outstretched arm from Chris. "Why don't you cut the 'sanctity of the quest' bullshit? You're a fucking voyeur and you know it!"

"Hey, you don't fucking know me!" Sweat tracing out kanji on his brow. "I don't know why the fuck Chris pulled you into our group, anyway! We didn't have problems before you showed up! First the, the near miss we had a few weeks back, and now this!"

"Don't blame this on Chris!" Sam spun Fitz around to face her. Roland sags into one corner. The two of them make quite a unified front.

The argument continues, but he tunes it all out. Looks at Maddox. "What did you steal, Maddox? From which house?"

"It isn't goddamned stealing. They left it behind. It's their garbage. We're, you guys are like those frigging homeless guys who make art out of people's old bikes and shit they throw out. This is..."

"Maddox." Softly. Looking instead at Sam. "What did you take?"

He holds out his hand. A thin loop of gold. "Those shampoo bottles, man. She was playing a shell game with it. And she lost, or... won, I dunno. These things are ghosts that haunt these houses forever, Rolls. I don't think..."

Fitz had walked out of the house. Chris follows after him after tossing Roland one last regretful glance. Roland takes the ring from Maddox, and it'd be meaningful to say that it felt heavy, but it didn't at all.

"What if they'd come back for it, man? It's never too late to turn back."

Samantha closes his fingers around the ring without looking at him. "Yes, Roland, sometimes it is."

Years earlier, and Frank is in New York, telling the barman to leave the bottle.

Franklin Brennan, sporting a fair bit more of his original hair color, watches the crowd across the street. The currency exchange is the only one for miles around open this late, and this last half hour is a carnival show of the wretches who can't trust their employers' checks and the wretches who know that the first wretches are there, collecting cash money. The only thing that topped the scene were the clinics that bought plasma. Some months, Frank would be over there; this month, he has an advance tucked into his coat pocket, folded into a Zip-Loc bag with a card ostensibly signed by his godson.

Frank's drinking buddy nudges his arm, and he hangs his head in the other direction to take in his old friend Marty, who is once again scribbling on a napkin in direct violation of their "no working at the bar" rule. He was always working on his "great novel," always pulling bits of sodden, pen-covered envelope out of

his pockets at the laundromat. Frank hadn't taken him seriously at first; he'd seemed the sort of perfectionist who forever worked his first chapter. But the upended milk crate in his studio apartment kept collecting draft pages, and the bits that Frank had espied had been.... well, Frank wasn't sure he was right to judge, but they had at least a confident hand.

The man did have one weakness, though.

Marty drains the last of his Calvados and leans in. "Is he gone?"

Frank casts a glance to the darker end of the bar, where a "Super"-Kabang! cabinet is serenading a pair of truckers at the nearby pool table with its bug-zapper soundtrack. "Yeah, he's gone." Someone had been on the machine when they'd entered the bar together, and Marty just couldn't abide being seen standing, waiting for the game to finish. Frank had suggested he join the other man for a two-player game, but Marty wouldn't dare kabang a fellow player. It was a strange mix of shame and honor code that drove the younger writer, and the surest sign that despite the diffident attitude that he often displayed when mentioning the games,

Marty was a fan of them. He actually cared about the stupid things.

Marty grabs up his notes in one fist and slides off his bar stool. Out the window, some of the crowd had gotten into it more heavily than usual, and as Frank watches, two men seem to hug until one falls backwards and doesn't get back up. Frank gives it a five-count, and then knocks on the bar. The bartender slides back over, and Frank nods to the window. "Better call someone. I'd bet they'll be coming in here." And then he collects his glass and his bottle and goes to join Marty at the machine.

Marty isn't looking at him, doesn't even exist in this world anymore. He's in the game; adrift in a non-space trying to maintain his sense of self in a trap designed to destroy, to de-story, him. They'd met at some terrible function, where Frank had learned that the younger man had done some well- and hard-traveling, but this was always where the travel stopped.

Marty's notes are piled atop the console, and Frank takes the top sheaf from the pile and glances at it.

"For it was language itself that formed the walls of his labyrinth, even if his perambulations were taking him quite literally around and through a mottled bezoar of urban alleyways... the denizens were gargoyles, the lot of them. Bent students, fascist old hens, tuneless swayers, keepers of empty shops, rinds turned inward for the last of their own juices, hollow driftwood sculptures filled with salt and ash."

He looks up as some of the brawlers storm in, presenting their cases to the barkeep as if he had some stake in it. There are police and an ambulance outside. He fills his glass back up, letting his lids fall half-closed as he feels the sensation of the glass tensing, or seeming to.

"Hey, Marty..."

"Shhh." He doesn't look up from the game. Frank can see the length of the string of mines, and can almost make the connection work, something about Ariadne's thread, but he's just a little too pickled, the words aren't there, it all sounds a little trite. He fishes in his pocket, finds a coin, and places it on the cabinet to mark his desire to join the next game.

And here we are, back in Dante's Pizza and Games, with Dale Messner, who has closed his cell phone and is thinking about friendship, and other things besides; knowing that he'd better get back to the hotel, better see his wife and daughter and put the rest off past this slow and easy convention time.

Two college-age boys are leaning against the rail on the rhythm level as Dale walks past, blinking his eyes over and over. Prep school types in some kind of uniform, eating slices of pizza that they'd folded in half, the grease running down their sleeves. Sneering at everything, alone in a crowded room.

"One of the big things that I don't like about science-fiction is that everything has some bullshit Star Trek explanation," says the one in freckles, who has a cigarette behind one ear because he saw it in a movie. "Like, what the fuck is a tachyon? And why should I believe that it solves every problem?"

"No, no," says the other, "actually, that's a cool thing, there's this guy Feinberg, it's not important, but what he said was that any

tachyon traveling back is inherently equivalent to one moving forward, and because observing one inherently creates more..." And he's got that Tarentino voice – not the one in his movies, the one he uses in interviews – and he's talking with his hands, waving his pizza around, dripping. "The kill-the-grandfather thing, right? It's the modern, or postmodern, or whatever the fuck today is, like, trust no one over thirty, kill the past, but we create history! And it informs the future, right? So, that's fucking science fiction!" Punching his friend in the shoulder,

And it's so almost on the verge of sense and meaning without being such that it makes Dale smile, just a bit, as he steps out into the sun.

It is true, perhaps, that we carry all the moments of our history behind us, like a chain of mines, waiting for the chain to be so unwieldy that it self-destructs. But it is just as so that sometimes those moments conceal gems of something else; truth, maybe, or promise. Sometimes we can't find those, can't see them, until the time we need them, and so we just keep moving, lengthening the chain, riding out our quarter for as long as we have.

Project: Ballad is brought to you by

Michael Peterson has written for The House Next Door at Slant Magazine. He lives in Chicago, IL and wishes he had fewer opinions about video games.

@patchworkearth

*For Kristin, with love;
for Ryan, because I didn't forget.*

Kevin Czapiewski is a tall cartoonist working in Cleveland, OH. Kevin is the “Comics Mom” of the small publishing and distribution outfit Czap Books.

@kevinczap

*For Cathy, Liz, Matt, Cleveland,
Providence, DC, NY and all the
rest of you.*



- “ *Project:Ballad* is an intricate, engaging, and very human story, told with some of the most beautiful art you'll ever lay eyes on. Every page is a treat, dude- the next one can never come soon enough.
- LIZ SUBURBIA, *Sacred Heart*
- “ *Project: Ballad* is the rare work that manages to interrogate and celebrate its influences while still managing to stand on its own two feet, thanks to the remarkable art from Kevin and clever scripting from Michael. P:B is smart and funny, which is plenty enough for me.
- DAVID BROTHERS, *4th Letter!*
- “ Dizzily layered and handsomely drawn, these characters are carved in service of pure comics.
- MICHEL FIFFE, *Copra, Zegas*

In four and a half days, an explosion of blue light will erupt from a convention center in Indiana.

In three hours, two very different worlds will come into contact.

Right now, Kendra Price is waking up with a hangover.

Attending the Midwest Fan Fair with her friends from an online message board in hopes of winning a costume contest, Kendra thinks life can't get worse than her parents' divorce, a rival contestant with an axe to grind, their forum's resident troll, and a pounding headache. But she and her friends are about to find themselves pawns in a plan that could doom not only her own world, but the one that had served as her escapist sanctuary since she was a girl.

And the clock is ticking...

Project: Ballad is a story about creators, creations, and audiences. It begins here.

PROJECTBALLAD.COM
COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS/LITERATURE

